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A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Experience

by

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Dedication

To my children, Gabriel and Savannah, may they know the full spectrum of human experience.

Abstract

This study provides an in-depth phenomenological analysis of reported spiritual experiences. Six participants were interviewed and asked to describe the immediate, or pre-reflective level, of experiences which they themselves had identified as "spiritual experiences". The sample that was chosen limits the focus to spontaneously occurring, unusual states of awareness that the participants referred to as spiritual experiences. The impact of the experiences on the lives of the participants is examined as a secondary interest. The results suggest that spiritual experiences are non-ordinary states of consciousness that vary in intensity along a continuum from mildly altered to profoundly altered states. The profoundly altered states that were reported include "mystical" visions and out-of-body experiences. A total of ten relatively distinct states of awareness were reported by the participants as examples of spiritual experience. The quality of the reported experiences provides a picture of an "alternate reality," a reality that is generally depicted as being harmonious, connected and infused with an energy that the participants described as "loving." Conceptual implications for a model of consciousness are discussed and suggestions for further research are provided.

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Chapter One

Introduction

"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.
We are spiritual beings having a human experience."
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 1965.

A number of influential psychological theorists, including William James (1902), Carl Jung (1972), and Erik Erikson (1950), have argued that spirituality is often overlooked as a key dimension of human experience. William James, in his seminal work, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), argued that an understanding of spirituality must begin with the personally meaningful experiences of individuals. Surprisingly, 32% of a 1996 representative sample of Canadians, answered the following question affirmatively: "Would you say that you ever had a religious or mystical experience, that is, a moment of sudden insight and awakening?" (Reid, 1996). Even though these experiences appear to be quite prevalent, mainstream psychology has yet to acknowledge that spiritual or mystical experiences warrant any serious scientific consideration.

One of the reasons that spiritual experience has been neglected is due to the fact that the methodology of mainstream Western psychology is grounded in the tradition of the natural sciences. Within this tradition the focus of inquiry tends to be towards behavior that is observable, quantifiable and whose existence and characteristics can be agreed upon by two or more observers (Valle & King, 1978). However, in recent years, psychology has begun to see the reemergence of qualitative methodologies, which are grounded in a tradition of the *human sciences*. The purpose of the present study is to apply a particular

human science research method, that of phenomenology, to the study of individual spiritual experience.

William James (1902), argues that it is within the personally meaningful experiences of individuals that the key to an understanding of spirituality and religious behavior can be found. In his study, James examined written accounts of religious and mystical experience and concluded that there are some common, identifiable feelings and sensations which make up the experience. For James, the experience comes first and the spiritual beliefs and concepts follow. This position is evident in the following quotation from James (1902): "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theologic formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue" (p.329).

It was James' contention that immediate personal experience provides the knowledge or awareness upon which all the organized religions are based. According to James, this awareness is acquired through direct sensory contact and, as such, is unmediated by social concepts, judgments or beliefs. In the conclusion of his famous study on the psychology of religion, James(1902) suggests that a direct experience of spiritual awareness occurs when an individual "breaks" through to an altered state of consciousness. James states:

> The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep

discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. (p.391)

Ken Wilber (1996), who has been described as the foremost contemporary writer on consciousness and transpersonal psychology, would undoubtedly agree with James' suggestion that spiritual awareness is realized through altered or expanded states of consciousness. Wilber argues that we all have a "transpersonal self," a self that can transcend our individuality and connect us with a world beyond conventional time and space. He suggests that we in the West, over the last few centuries, have increasingly tended to repress the transcendent dimension of human experience.

Wilber's early work (1977, 1980, 1983) maps out a spectrum of consciousness that moves through progressive levels of conscious identity. He suggests that through personal development, the individual's sense of identity progresses from the limited "ego consciousness" to "unity consciousness," which is characterized as the ultimate and supreme state of awareness. According to Wilber, in the progress towards unity consciousness all of us may experience a momentary expansion of consciousness that he describes as the "transpersonal witness."

Whether or not the experiences referred to by James and Wilber are best described as "spiritual" or "expanded states of consciousness," people have experiences which they describe as a feeling of being in touch with something beyond themselves. Reports of these experiences (Hardy, 1979; James, 1902; Proudfoot, 1985) generally describe the duration of the experience as very brief, lasting for seconds or minutes. These experiences are often described as being quite "out of the ordinary" and people may struggle to find words that

can adequately express the essential quality of the experience. A U.S. national survey reported by Hay and Morisy (1978) asked the following question: "Do you feel that you have ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?" Thirty-four percent of the nation wide poll (n=1865) answered the question affirmatively. The number of affirmative answers to the question increases to 45% amongst respondents age fifty-five and older.

More recently, a 1989 survey of a representative sample of U.S. citizens, reported that 30% answered affirmatively to the item: "You felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself." A full 12% of these same respondents claimed that they had experienced this feeling often or on several occasions (General Social Survey, 1989). The Canadian sample mentioned earlier found that 34% of a national survey (n=1500) answered affirmatively to the following question: "Have you ever felt you were in close contact with something holy or sacred?" While 53% answered affirmatively to the question: "Have you ever, as an adult, had the feeling that you were somehow in the presence of God?"

In the simplest terms, it seems clear that a substantial number of people have had these personally meaningful experiences that they often describe as a feeling of being in touch with a non-physical force or presence. Another common characteristic of these reported experiences is an altered perception of the world. Consensual "reality" is perceived in a new "light" that provides insights and, occasionally, a dramatic shift in the person's worldview. The word or term that people generally use to label or categorize these experiences is "spiritual."

Alister Hardy (1979) and colleagues collected and examined over three thousand first-hand accounts of people's spiritual experiences. In his book, The Spiritual Nature of Man, Hardy(1979) introduces us to the subject by providing the following example from his own personal experience :

> One day as I was walking along Marylebone Road I was suddenly seized with an extraordinary sense of great joy and exaltation, as though a marvelous beam of spiritual power had shot through me linking me in a rapture with the world, the Universe, Life with a capital L, and all the beings around me. All delight and power, all things living, all time fused in a brief second. (p.1)

What should we make of this brief and unusual experience, which is clearly very personally meaningful? Can we write it off as a delusion, a neurological epiphenomenon? Could it be a product of stress or an imbalance of brain chemistry? How do we make sense of the fact that other peoples' experiences, which are also described as spiritual, have very similar content and characterization?

Phenomenology and the Purpose of the Study

If we were to examine the nature of the above experience from a phenomenological perspective, whose methodology is grounded in the human sciences, the question of the "actual existence" and "true character" of the experience would not even arise. From a phenomenological perspective, the experience itself becomes the focus of inquiry. Phenomenological psychology takes a perspective that acknowledges the reality of the realm of meaningful experience as the fundamental locus of knowledge

(Polkinghorne, 1983). Phenomenologically, the question becomes: what can we learn about consciousness, and the human experience in general, from these descriptions of experience that people describe as spiritual? Phenomenology, as founded and developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is a method which allows us to contact phenomena as we actually live them out and experience them (Valle & King, 1978).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the experiences that people describe as spiritual from a phenomenological perspective. To achieve this goal I conducted in-depth interviews with six participants, or co-researchers, who reported that they had experienced one or more spiritual experiences. Although a precise definition of spiritual experience will not be attempted, the following general interpretation will serve to limit the range of experiences which will be considered spiritual for the present study:

> A spiritual experience may be conceptualized as an unusual state of awareness, characterized by the individual's report of an alternate perception of the world and/or a sense of being conscious of a non-physical force or power. The phrase "perception of the world" includes perception of self.

The focus of the present study is on those experiences that spontaneously occur in the lives of "ordinary" people. In other words, drug induced or altered state experiences that were intentionally initiated through specific procedures such as holotropic breathing, fasting, or esoteric meditative practices, were not included in the study. Neither did I choose participants who reported so-called near-death experiences. The primary goal of the study is to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the lived experience of

those spontaneously occurring, unusual states of awareness that people describe as spiritual experiences.

Constituents of Spiritual Experience

To gain a deeper understanding of any human experience we often have to divide it into its parts, separate from the whole. From the research reported by James (1902) and more recent research by Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988), we find that descriptions of spiritual experience are often divided into two general constituents: (1) an experiential constituent, which occurs at the level of sensation and perception, and (2) an intellectual or interpretive constituent, at the level of cognition.

Hardy (1979) examined over three thousand written accounts of peoples' spiritual experiences, and classified the phenomenon into ninety-two different categories of spiritual awareness. His research also suggests two general components of the experience: (1) sensory and behavioral elements, and (2) cognitive and affective elements.

The effort to distinguish the constituents that together make up the overall spiritual experience, help to clarify the complicated experience and generate a language which enables us to further study the phenomenon. James (1902) argues that at the core of the religious experience we find "feeling," and the interpretation or theology of religion follows. Although these distinctions between the various elements of the experience provide a structure for us to examine the experience, the boundaries between the identified elements can prove to be somewhat arbitrary. Is sensation distinct from feeling? Does feeling come first and meaning follow? Can we separate feeling and thinking and classify

them as discretely different phenomena? These issues will be discussed more fully in the literature review section that follows.

There is one distinction that will be applied to the study of spiritual experience that is "built in," or a given, when we apply the phenomenological method of study. The phenomenological perspective employs a distinction between the immediate or pre-reflective level of experience and the reflective level of experience. The immediate, pre-reflective level of the experience, is what is in consciousness during the time of the experience. The reflective level of the experience occurs when we retrospectively make sense of the experience once it has "passed." This distinction between the pre-reflective and reflective level of the experience limits the focus of the study and provides the basic structure from which the following questions are generated.

The Questions

The first question addressed in the study is : (1) What is the immediate, or pre-reflective, experience of spirituality? This question focuses on an examination of the experiential level of the experience. At the pre-reflective or experiential level of the experience we find sensations, feelings, and what has been described as "sensed meaning." (Valle & King, 1978). Sensed meaning may be conceptualized as somewhere "between" thinking and feeling. To achieve a qualitative understanding of this lived experience, participants were interviewed with the focus narrowed to reports of their immediate, "in the moment," experience. This first question, which is aimed at an examination of the pre-reflective level of spiritual experience, is the primary focus of the proposed study. To

answer this primary question, the phenomenological method is employed and chapter five presents a thorough phenomenological analysis of this "lived" experience.

Research on spiritual experience (Elkins et al., 1988; Hardy, 1979; Proudfoot, 1985) reveals that individuals interpret and reflect on the experience after the experience is over. The individual who has the experience is often at a loss for words to describe the experience. The experience itself may be described as a feeling or emotion accompanied by intuition, bodily knowing or "sensed meaning." These sensations, feelings and intuitions, are later interpreted by the individual and then influence or inform the individual's actions and worldview. The second question addressed by the study is : (2) What is the reflective experience of spirituality? This question focuses on an examination of the reflective meanings and interpretations that are attributed to spiritual experience.

The third question of the study, which is addressed in the final "Discussion" chapter, is more conceptual in nature. With the two questions stated above the goal was to present the results as close to the original data as possible. In other words, the experiences were analyzed within the overall goal of remaining true to the individual's reported experience. This part of the study remains true to the intention of the phenomenological method. The study's third question is more interpretive and abstract, moving away from the raw personal data. The question is: (3) What does the phenomenological analysis of spiritual experience reveal to us about the nature of human consciousness ? In other words, what hypotheses can we generate about the nature of consciousness from the analysis of the reported pre-reflective level of spiritual experience? In an attempt to

address this question I draw heavily on the work of Ken Wilber (1977, 1979, 1980, 1996) and his proposed transpersonal model of consciousness.

Conceptual and Practical Relevance

The study has relevance both at the conceptual and practical level. At the conceptual level, a number of interesting questions are involved. If spiritual experiences appear to be altered or expanded states of consciousness, then what do these altered states reveal to us about the nature of consciousness? Do the qualitative, phenomenological descriptions of the immediate, or pre-reflective, experience of spiritual consciousness "fit" with any current conceptual models of human consciousness?

Another important conceptual issue involves the question of how people attribute meaning to their experience and to their lives in general. If there is a common thread in the literature on spiritual experience, it is that these experiences are consistently reported as being personally meaningful and significant to the individual. People often describe the experience in terms of its significant impact on their view of themselves and the world around them. How is it that these brief, so-called transcendent, experiences have such profound influence? This issue brings up fascinating theoretical questions concerning the extent to which meaning "exists" in the world or is socially constructed. The recent lively debates on the social construction of meaning and postmodernism in psychology provide a rich background to this discussion (Kvale, 1992; Spretnak, 1991).

The practical significance of the study is relevant to anybody who is interested in a qualitative understanding of human consciousness. As stated earlier, mainstream

psychology still seems to shy away from the study of subjective experience. However, the field of transpersonal psychology, which continues to exist on the very margins of the overall field of psychology, has shown a great interest in altered states of consciousness. These altered states have been researched by transpersonal psychologists in an attempt to harness their potential for both physical and psychological healing (Assagioli, 1976; Grof, 1990; Vaughan, 1979).

For the practicing psychotherapist, and other mental health professionals, an understanding of spiritual experience takes on a special significance. Empathy, which is so central to the relationship between therapist and client, rests on a shared understanding of emotional and intellectual content. Exposure to the lived-experience of spirituality provides the therapist with a brief glimpse into the otherwise hidden world of the client's subjectivity. As Polkinghorne (1983) states, the reader of a phenomenological research report should come away with the feeling that "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p.46).

In a recent survey of clinical psychologists in California (Shafranske & Malony, 1990) 74% (N = 303) of 409 respondents disagreed with the statement that "religious or spiritual issues are outside the scope of psychology." Sixty percent (N = 214) reported that clients often expressed their personal experiences in religious language, and approximately half of the therapists estimated that 1 in 6 of their clients presented issues which involve religion or spirituality. Fifty-two percent (N = 214) reported spirituality as important in their professional life. Keeping these percentages in mind, it was reported that 67% (N = 273) of the clinicians agreed with the statement : "Psychologists, in general, do

not possess the knowledge or skills to assist individuals in their religious or spiritual development" (p.75).

Finally, as reported by Hardy (1979) and Denne and Thompson (1991), spiritual experiences are consistently described by people as positive experiences that contributed to both meaning and purpose in their lives. As Frankl (1969) has so eloquently argued, a sense of meaning and purpose in life is closely associated with an individual's overall psychological health. Therefore, a more complete understanding of how these brief spiritual experiences influence an individual's sense of meaning and purpose in life has significant practical importance for mental health professionals. In summary, what can these spiritual experiences tell us about the dynamics of psychological change and personal development?

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In this chapter I provide a review of the key issues related to spiritual experience that have been addressed in the literature. The following review reveals that three central issues have been consistently addressed. The first issue has to do with claims to knowledge accorded to spiritual or religious experience, the second issue addresses the question of human consciousness and what spiritual experiences tell us about consciousness, and the third issue focuses on the actual description of spiritual perception, or the quality of the spiritual experience itself.

In order to provide the reader with a "feel" for the quality of reported spiritual experiences, this chapter includes a number of first hand accounts of spiritual experiences.

Introduction- The Problem with Experience

Some of the early pioneers who studied spiritual experience first addressed the issue of what specific claims to knowledge could be accorded to these nebulous states of awareness. Proudfoot (1985), in discussing the history of the study of religious experience, asserts that philosophical disagreements concerning the subject tended to center on issues related to subjectivity vs. objectivity. Proudfoot (1985) credits Friedrich Schleiermacher as the earliest and most systematic proponent of the autonomy, and therefore objectivity, of religious experience. Schleiermacher insisted on the immediacy of religious experience, describing it as a sense, a taste, a matter of feeling and intuition. Schleiermacher was proposing that religious experience is directly "sensed", and as such is

untouched by thought. According to Proudfoot (1985) Schleiermacher's assertion that religious experience was exclusively a matter of feeling was challenged by the Enlightenment critics, especially Kant, who argued that all of our experiences are structured by the categories and thoughts we "place" on the world.

The above historical disagreement revolves around the idea of whether thinking or feeling is a more objective, and therefore accurate, representation of reality. This confusion concerning the relative superiority of subjectivity vs. objectivity is "transcended" by the phenomenological approach to the study of human experience. The positivist, natural science view rests on the assumption that the world of objective reality is distinct from the subjective experience of the individual. From this perspective, our subjective experience should be split off and "controlled" so as to get an accurate picture of the "true" external reality. The phenomenological approach instead speaks of the total, indissoluble unity or interrelationship of the individual and his or her world (Valle & King, 1978). This approach does not attempt to distinguish between the part of experience that "belongs to the world" and the part that "belongs to the person," but instead views experience as an interdependent unity between world and person. The individual and his or her world are said to co-constitute one another.

The relevance of the above discussion to the present study has to do with the methodological underpinnings of the study of spiritual experience. The phenomenological approach, which I have employed, does not attempt to isolate the individual's experience of the world by breaking it down into affective and cognitive components and then discarding one or the other. Instead, the phenomenological approach focuses on the

immediate or pre-reflective level of the experience, where the distinction between feeling and thinking breaks down.

At the pre-reflective level of experience meaning is described as being "sensed" (Valle & King, 1978). That is, there is a "bodily knowing," that cannot be accurately identified as either thought or feeling. This pre-reflective level of experience is prior to reflective thought and language. An example of knowing without language is evidenced in the following quote from Albert Einstein (1952) :

> The words of the language as they are written or spoken do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images ...these elements are, in my case, of a visual and some of a muscular type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a secondary stage. (p.43)

Employing the phenomenological distinction between pre-reflective and reflective level of experience seems to be well suited to the study of spiritual experience. Trying to decide whether spiritual experiences are solely a matter of feeling, or feeling first and thinking second, appears to have boxed previous researchers into a corner. However, I am aware that using the pre-reflective - reflective distinction may also prove to be somewhat arbitrary and confusing. For instance, what criteria do we use to accurately distinguish between the pre-reflective and reflective levels of the experience?

The meta-issue that arises in the above discussion is really an inherent paradox that confronts human science as well as natural science. In our attempt to understand some

identified phenomenon we break it down into pieces separate from the whole. Understanding the individual pieces often provides us with a more complete understanding of the whole. However, at the same time, dissecting and fragmenting distorts our perspective and the integrity of the phenomenon is often lost in the process. This paradoxical issue is especially relevant when studying spiritual experience and will be discussed further in the discussion section of the paper.

In returning to the issue of the distinction between religious feeling and thought, the work of Rudolf Otto (1931) carries on this discussion. Otto's thesis, which is discussed below, emphasizes the importance of religious *feelings* as the invariable elements out of which the variety of religious traditions emerge.

Otto and the Idea of The Holy

Rudolf Otto's (1931) book The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Divine, first published in 1917, is concerned with those elements of religious experience which lie outside the scope of reason - the non-rational elements. He suggested that there is both a rational and non-rational factor in religious experience. Otto did not attempt to assert an argument for the relative superiority of either the rational or the non-rational factor, but instead argued for the importance and value of both factors.

Otto developed the argument that certain basic non-rational "moments of feeling" are characteristically found in all of the "genuine" religions. He suggested that these moments of feeling that reoccur across the great diversity of religions reveal the impact of

the "divine" upon the human mind. Although Otto asserted that the feeling element is non-rational he also argued that religious feeling involves a genuine "knowing" or awareness. This knowing is seen as non-rational and is contrasted to the rational knowing of concepts and theories.

In searching for a general term to describe the feelings associated with the awareness or knowing of the divine, Otto suggested that the closest approximation might be the term "holiness." However, he argued that holiness is a word that is charged with ethical import and as such is associated with a rational process of moral deliberation. In order to capture the non-rational factor associated with these "moments of feeling," Otto coined the term "*numinous*". The numinous, then, refers to the non-rational apprehension of the divine and Otto argued that the numinous state of mind is irreducible to any other state.

Otto contended that unless one has had some personal encounter with a numinous or religious experience of whatever intensity, it is impossible to begin to comprehend the nature of the experience. In attempting to capture the quality of the numinous experience, Otto (1931) offered the following passage:

> The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to

> intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy...It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *Mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures. (p.12)

In an effort to identify the elements that constitute this Mystery of numinous experience, Otto suggested the following list: awefullness, overpoweringness, energy or urgency, the "wholly other", and fascination. This list provided by Otto is in a very real sense the identification of phenomenological themes that emerge through an analysis of religious experience. Otto focused on the *immediate* feeling level of religious experience and attempted to capture the central elements associated with the phenomenon. As such, Otto's work stands out as a classic in the history of the phenomenology of religious experience. Another classic study of religious experience is that of William James (1902), whose work is still considered a very influential and thorough examination of the psychology of religious experience.

James and the Varieties of Religious Experience

In William James' seminal work on religious experience, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), his central argument is that feeling, in the form of personal experience, is the source of religious belief. In his study he examines first-hand written accounts of religious experiences and attempts to classify and assess the nature of these experiences. In the introduction, James (1902) lays out his purpose and method :

> If the inquiry be psychological, not religious institutions but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography. (p.22)

As we can see, James' focus is on experience itself and his subject selection is based on a criterion of choosing information-rich cases. He states at the outset that religious experience can and ought to be described and assessed without regard to how the experience is to be explained. James is interested in the meaning, significance and value of the spiritual experience, not its origin or history. In other words, James steered away from the question of what "caused" spiritual experience, preferring to focus on the knowledge that comes solely from a description of the *quality* of the experience. This suspension of the question of the "true reality" of the experience is described by the phenomenologist as the "first epoche" or bracketing (Polkinghorne, 1983). Although Husserl's founding of phenomenology occurred at a later date (1913/1931), I am sure he would have been pleased with James' decidedly phenomenological approach to the study of spiritual experience.

However, as was suggested earlier, the lack of clarity in James' argument seems to center around the issue of the difference between sensations, feelings, intuitions and thoughts. He insists, apparently using a similar argument to that proposed by Schliermacher, that fundamentally religious experience is a feeling or a sensation which is devoid of intellectual content. Yet, these sensations which James describes almost

invariably contain intuitions, propositions, and beliefs about the individual's relationship to the world, the universe, or God.

Although James emphasizes the importance of feeling as the basis of religion, ironically the focus of his study is predominantly on the beliefs which he describes as products of the initial feelings. Nevertheless, James does provide us with an interesting description of the feelings that are associated with the "conversion" experience. He describes conversion as an intense personal experience that leads to a dramatic change in one's worldview. James identifies three general characteristics associated with these intense religious experiences. The first characteristic or theme is described as "a sense of higher control" (p.195). At the most fundamental level James believes that reports of religious experience reveal "that we can experience union with something larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace" (p.395). He believes that this sense of presence of a higher power is a common theme that runs through the variety of reported religious experiences.

James notes that this awareness of a higher power is often experienced when an individual has given up hope in his or her own ability to control or alter personal circumstances. The theme of giving up hope or finally surrendering to the moment, stands out as a central issue in both western and eastern religions and philosophies. Krishnamurti, who has written extensively on the nature of spiritual experience, emphasizes the importance of refraining from seeking (Mehta, 1991). In our continuous effort to predict and "move" into the future we miss the all enlightening moment which is now. The following quotes are from Krishnamurti :

> The state of direct experiencing is attention without motive (p.126). It is only when the totality of the mind is still, that the creative, the nameless, comes into being (p.186, cited in Mehta, 1991).

Krishnamurti seems to be suggesting that awareness of a higher power comes into being when one moves beyond the ego's strivings and surrenders to the present moment.

The second identified characteristic of religious experience is described by James as a state of assurance or faith-state. He describes the experience as "the loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer condition should remain the same" (p.198). Accompanying this intuitive sense that "all is well" is a lucid, or expanded state of consciousness. This expansion of awareness provides the subject with deep insights which are often later described as ineffable or beyond words.

According to James, the faith or assurance state is also characterized by an altered perception of the world where "An appearance of newness beautifies every object" (p.199). He describes this perception of beauty in the world as one of the most common themes in records of religious experience. The third, and final, general characteristic that James attributes to religious experience is a state of ecstasy or happiness.

Richard Bucke and Cosmic Consciousness

Perhaps the most interesting and uplifting description of a spiritual experience that I have come across is that provided by the author of Cosmic Consciousness (1969), Richard M. Bucke. Bucke's description contains all of the characteristics which James

describes above. Bucke was a Canadian physician who experienced the following phenomenal "illumination" while visiting England in 1872. He had been out with friends discussing ideas and reading poetry. On the way home alone, he was in a self-described state of "quiet, almost passive, enjoyment," when:

> All at once I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant I thought of fire, an immense conflagration somewhere close by in that great city; the next, I knew that the fire was within myself. Directly afterward there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. Among other things, I did not merely come to believe, but I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence: I became conscious in myself of eternal life. It was not a conviction that I would have eternal life, but a consciousness that I possessed eternal life then; I saw that all men are immortal; that the cosmic order is such that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all; that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love, and that the happiness of each and all is in the long run absolutely certain. The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of the reality of what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century which has since elapsed. (cited in Wilber, 1979, p.1)

Bucke (1969) went on to write about this extraordinary state of awareness and developed the argument that humankind was in the process of evolving to a new level of

consciousness. Bucke believes that just as we evolved from a simple consciousness, which is characteristic of the animal species, to a self-consciousness or awareness of the self, so shall we evolve from self-consciousness to cosmic consciousness. Bucke is of the opinion that his experience, reported above, is one such example of this expanded state of awareness. He contends that his experience is just a glimpse at an awareness that others, such as the Buddha, Jesus, Dante, William Blake, and Walt Whitman, to name a few, were able to experience on numerous occasions. According to Bucke, the teachings that these learned people passed on to humanity emerged from their direct experience with an "illumination" that he calls cosmic consciousness.

Maslow and Peak Experiences

In the book Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences, Abraham Maslow(1964) forcefully argues that the core transcendent experience or, in his words the "peak-experience," is a legitimate subject for scientific investigation and speculation. Maslow suggests that the transcendent experience is not a rare experience reserved for mystics and prophets, but instead is available to all of us if we temporarily set aside our logical and rational perspectives of the world. Maslow argues that the core experience has a common "essence" which provides the foundation for a perennial philosophy with identifiable values. He argues for the validity of knowledge gained from transcendent experiences. The validity, according to Maslow, should be recognized based on the practical influence the experience has on the individual. The experience is valid and significant because it profoundly, and often permanently, alters the individual's perception of the world. This

perceptual shift is consistently one where the individual is left with a higher sense of personal meaning and purpose in life.

Maslow was quite critical of the traditional position of Western psychiatry which held that these "peak experiences" were indications of mental disease. His research demonstrated that these experiences often occur in normal, well-adjusted people. Maslow also came to the conclusion that if the process initiated by these experiences is allowed to reach its natural completion, the result for the individual is a fuller capacity to express one's creative potential - or what he called "self-actualization" or "self-realization" (Maslow, 1971). The psychiatrist Walter Pahkne developed a list of basic characteristics of a typical peak experience, based on the work of Abraham Maslow and W.T. Stace. Pahkne's list of the basic characteristics is presented below (cited in Grof , 1990, p. 74).

- Unity (inner and outer)
- Strong positive emotion
- Transcendence of time and space
- Sense of sacredness (numiosity)
- Paradoxical nature
- Objectivity and reality of the insights
- Ineffability
- Positive aftereffects

Much of Maslow's work was directed toward the values which are associated with peak-experiences. Although he did investigate "peak-experience perception" itself, his primary concern appears to have been the values that are a *product* of this perception. In contrast, the present study provides an in-depth examination of the immediate perception itself. Spiritual perception, or the pre-reflective experience itself, is the primary focus of

the present study. The reflective level of the experience, which includes the beliefs and values that were of interest to Maslow, is examined as a secondary interest of the study.

Whereas Maslow was interested in how spiritual experiences contribute to moral development, the work of the following individual focused specifically on inducing spiritual experiences as a psychotherapeutic method.

Assagioli and Psychosynthesis

Psychosynthesis, as developed by Roberto Assagioli (1965), is a method of psychotherapy that incorporates the spiritual dimension of human experience into its approach. Assagioli points out that there are general similarities between his Psychosynthesis approach and Existential psychotherapy. Both Existentialism and Psychosynthesis emphasize the growing, actualizing, developmental nature of human self-realization. Both approaches also recognize the importance of individual choice and responsibility. Assagioli (1965) notes that what distinguishes Psychosynthesis from Existentialism is the former's emphasis on the importance of "will." Psychosynthesis makes use of various techniques aimed at arousing, strengthening and directing the will, which Assagioli describes "as an essential function of the self and as the necessary source or origin of all choices, decisions, engagements" (1965, p. 5).

The principles of Psychosynthesis suggest that once the individual has developed "will" and synthesized the various elements of his or her personality into an integral whole, then the energies of a higher consciousness may be experienced. Assagioli describes this higher consciousness as the realm of the "superconscious." He argues that spiritual

experience can be understood as the individual's temporary contact with this higher consciousness.

Psychosynthesis, as a psychotherapeutic approach, has a stated goal of fostering, facilitating and inducing spiritual experience (Assagioli,1965). Besides the important function of acknowledging and supporting the client though spiritual awakening, the Psychosynthesis therapist makes use of specific techniques which are designed to activate the higher unconscious or superconscious. It is through contact with the superconscious that the individual is perceived as progressing in personal and spiritual development.

Psychosynthesis techniques include guided imagery, strengthening of will exercises, intuition enhancing methods, and exercises which contribute to the deepening of the relationship between client and therapist. The Psychosynthesis approach assumes the pragmatic "reality" of spiritual experience and focuses its efforts on inducing these experiences which are described as catalysts to self-realization.

Turning to the study of philosophy, we find that Allan Watts stands out as a spokesperson for acknowledging the legitimacy and importance of spiritual experience.

Allan Watts and Itness

Watts (1988), who is the author of more than twenty books on the philosophy and psychology of religion, states :

> The most impressive fact in man's spiritual, intellectual, and poetic experience has always been, for me, the universal prevalence of those astonishing moments of insight which Richard Bucke called "cosmic consciousness."(p.17)

Watts suggests that these altered states of consciousness reveal a strikingly common theme; that of "accepting things the way they are" or perceiving that the state of the universe is in perfect harmony. As we have seen previously, this theme is what James (1902) described as the faith-state. According to Watts, it appears that the world is seen anew, with a certainty of its perfection and awe inspiring beauty. Watts (1988) explains further :

> Existence not only ceases to be a problem; the mind is so wonder-struck at the self-evident and self-sufficient fitness of things as they are, including what would ordinarily be thought the very worst, that it cannot find any word strong enough to express the perfection and beauty of the experience. (p.18)

Through his dedicated philosophical quest for knowledge and enlightenment, it appears that Watts himself experienced a number of dramatic alterations in perception. He reports that while discussing the issue of the importance of living "in the moment," someone asked him the following question;

> "But why *try* to live in the present? Surely we are always completely in the present even when we're thinking about the past or the future?" This, actually quite obvious remark, again brought on the sudden sensation of having no weight. At the same time the present seemed to become a kind of moving stillness, an eternal stream from which neither I nor anything could deviate. I saw that everything, just as it is now, is IT - is the whole point of there being life and a universe. (p.30, 1988)

Watts argues that these brief moments of insight are the common source from which all religions draw their inspiration. He points out that interpretation of the personal experience is naturally influenced by the surrounding philosophical and religious ideas of the respective culture. Watts describes the following account as a "simple" and "clean" example of spiritual experience :

> It was morning in early summer. A silver haze shimmered and trembled over the lime trees. The air was laden with their fragrance. The temperature was like a caress. I remember - I need not recall - that I climbed up a tree and felt suddenly immersed in Itness. It and I were one. (1988, p.21)

We can see from the above review that historically a few theorists and practitioners have attached a great deal of importance to spiritual experience. If we shift our focus to the present day, we find that two individuals particularly stand out as spokespeople for spiritual experience. These two individuals, who might actually be more comfortable with the expression, "non-ordinary states of consciousness," as opposed to spiritual experiences, are Ken Wilber and Stanislav Grof. Wilber's work offers us a conceptual representation, or model, of consciousness and Grof's work supplements this model by providing clinical research examples.

Wilber and a Model of Consciousness

Ken Wilber is a fascinating scholar who has written extensively on the subject of human development and, more specifically, on the evolution of consciousness. His early work (1977, 1980, 1983) takes on the monumental task of integrating Eastern and

Western approaches to psychology. With his latest books, Sex, Ecology, Spirituality (1995) and A Brief History of Everything (1996), Wilber attempts a further synthesis of even more distinct fields of study, such as psychology, sociology, ecology, physics and spirituality. In my review of the literature on spiritual experience, I found Wilber's work to offer the most convincing conceptual explanation for the occurrence of these unusual states of awareness. For this reason, I provide below a fairly lengthy description of Wilber's model of consciousness. Michael Washburn's (1995) book "The Ego and the Dynamic Ground" offers an alternative to Wilber's model of consciousness. Washburn's model has more in common with a psychoanalytic perspective of human development. In order to provide a comparison to Wilber's model I have included a brief review of Washburn's model below, highlighting those areas that contrast with Wilber's model.

According to Wilber (1996), if we examine the various fields of human knowledge, we find that certain broad, general themes emerge, over which there is very little disagreement. These general themes reveal that there are patterns of evolution that seem to occur throughout the universe, from *matter* to *life* to *mind*. In the present context, I am specifically interested in what Wilber has to say about the evolution of mind or consciousness, but before we examine these ideas, I would like to introduce a concept that Wilber uses as a fundamental building block for his general thesis, the concept of holons.

According to Wilber (1996), reality is composed of whole/parts, or holons*. Holons refer to an entity that is itself a *whole* and simultaneously a *part* of some other whole. For example, a whole atom is a part of a whole molecule, and the whole molecule is part of a whole cell, and the whole cell is a part of a whole organism, and so on. Each of

* Holon is actually a term borrowed from Arthur Koestler.

these entities is neither a whole nor a part, but a whole/part. Holons are the very fabric of the universe and appear in infinite form, from a chemical chain of increasing complexity to a chain of ideas that come together to make up a "larger argument." Every "thing" in the universe may be viewed as a holon. Now, the striking thing about holons is that they appear to creatively emerge, or transcend themselves, and thereby evolve towards a greater degree of wholeness. This evolution, then, is a self-transcending process, which incorporates what went before it and then adds novel, previously unknown, components.

Wilber points out that virtually all growth processes, from matter to life to mind, occur via natural hierarchies, or what would be more accurately termed, holarchies. A natural holarchy is simply an order of increasing wholeness. The whole of one level becomes a part of the whole of the next. Each emerging holon in the holarchy transcends but also includes its predecessors. In other words, the cell transcends - or goes beyond - its molecular components but also includes them. The new level of complexity cannot be reduced to the parts that make it up, it *transcends* them, and also *includes* them.

Wilber adopts this universal pattern of development in his analysis of consciousness. Wilber's work is a synthesis of Eastern and Western views and as such there is a vast amount of analysis summarized and interwoven in an attempt to create what might be described as a unified theory of consciousness. In the limited space that I have available in the present research review, it would be impossible to adequately describe the full complexity of Wilber's theory. For this reason I will only attempt a superficial description of the major levels that Wilber describes as constituting the spectrum of consciousness.

Wilber (1996) argues that there is a universal evolutionary sequence that moves from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit, each transcending and including its predecessor, each with a greater depth and a greater consciousness. At the highest level of consciousness we find what has been described as non-dual reality, cosmic consciousness, or as Wilber (1979) refers to it, unity consciousness or no-boundary awareness. This is the state of consciousness described by the mystics and is referred to by Wilber as the true nature and condition of all sentient beings. The no-boundary state of awareness is described as a direct, immediate, and non-verbal awareness. Following is Wilber's (1979) description of no-boundary awareness:

> In unity consciousness, in no-boundary awareness, the sense of self expands to totally include everything once thought to be not-self. One's sense of identity shifts to the entire universe, to all worlds, high or low, manifest or unmanifest, sacred or profane. And obviously this cannot occur as long as the primary boundary, which *separates* the self from the universe, is mistaken as real. But once the primary boundary is understood to be illusory, one's sense of self envelops the All - there is then no longer anything outside of oneself, and so nowhere to draw any sort of boundary. (p.47)

For reasons that are too complicated to go into here, we resist this no-boundary awareness and progressively limit our world by embracing boundaries that divide and fracture our experience into the countless parts that make up the whole. Wilber argues that once the primary boundary occurs and we separate ourselves from our identity, our oneness, with the universe, then other boundaries of identity follow and the person's sense

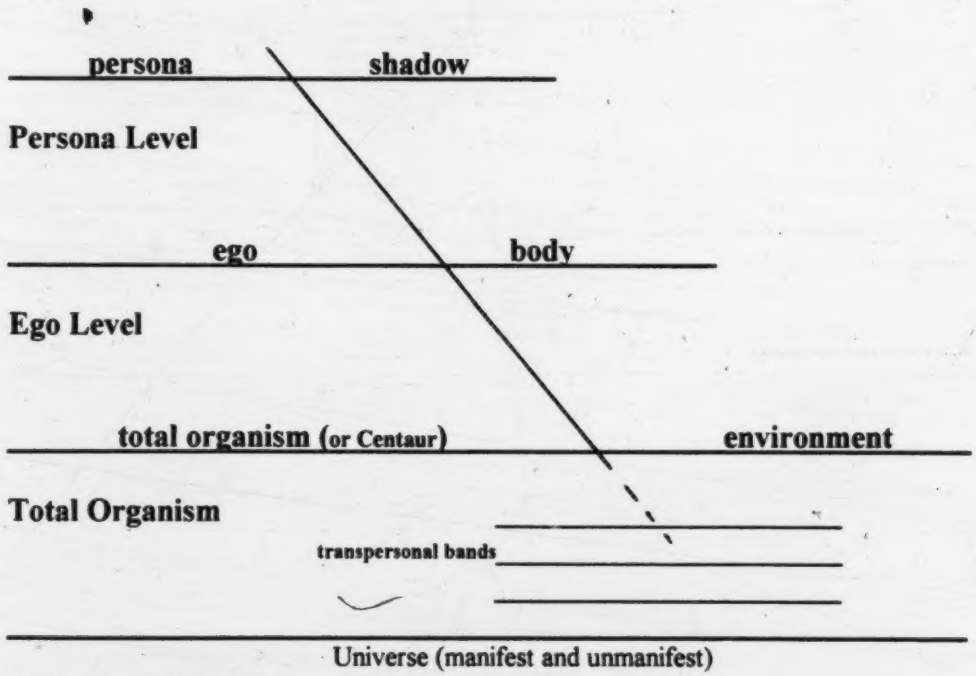
of self diminishes, shrinks, becomes more narrowed and restricted. Wilber describes a spectrum of consciousness that moves from the unity of no-boundary awareness to the limited, shadow level of the persona. The levels, starting from the lowest and moving to the highest level of the spectrum, are as follows: the persona level, the ego level, the total organism or centaur level, and finally, the level of unity consciousness. Although Wilber argues that the highest level, unity consciousness, is human kind's natural state of awareness, he also argues that it is in our nature to create boundaries and limit ourselves from this expansive consciousness.

The four major levels of consciousness described by Wilber may be viewed as a spectrum that moves from the fractured, multi-boundaried awareness of the lowest level, to the no-boundary awareness of the highest level, unity consciousness. These levels are depicted in Figure 1 on the following page. In the figure each of the first three levels are *split* in half where a false boundary has been erected between different parts of the self. Keeping in mind the concept of holons introduced earlier, the levels of consciousness make up a holarchy. The spectrum of consciousness moves through an order of increasing wholeness. The whole of each lower level becomes a part of the whole of the next. Each emerging level of consciousness in the spectrum, or holarchy, transcends but also includes its predecessors.

In the process of personal transformation, or evolution, the individual tends to move down the "ladder" of consciousness, with his or her awareness expanding, and thereby transcending, and also including the previous level . It is important to note that individuals can be at more than one level of consciousness at any particular time in their

life and that we can progress or regress back and forth between the levels. However, we are generally "stuck" at one level and, because a boundary line is also a "battle line," we struggle with our defined identity at that level[1]. Wilber argues that there are characteristic psychological problems and symptoms that arise at each particular level of the spectrum. These symptoms essentially develop as a result of the separation, or split, from the wholeness of unity consciousness, which, according to Wilber, is our ultimate evolutionary goal. All desires and drives are essentially seen as subsets of the desire and drive towards

[1] **FIGURE 1** The Spectrum of Consciousness**



** Adopted from Wilber (1979) p. 10.

unity consciousness. In addition to identifying the characteristic symptoms associated with each level of the spectrum, Wilber identifies which of the various schools of therapy, both psychological and spiritual, are particularly "fitted" to each of the levels.

At the first level of consciousness, where most of us find ourselves, we are trapped in the persona (see figure 1). At this level we attempt to split off parts of our self, parts of the so-called ego, that we have trouble accepting. A "shadow" self is created as we begin to deny certain aspects of ourselves, such as our anger, assertiveness, erotic impulses, ambition or even joy. We project and alienate those aspects of ourselves that are unwanted and, as Wilber (1979) states, we are left with "a narrowed, impoverished, and inaccurate self-image; the persona." The boundary that we have created between the persona and the shadow becomes a battle line and the battle that ensues brings forth the associated psychological symptoms. Wilber suggests that Freudian theory is the classic example of an analysis of the dynamics of the ego, persona and shadow, with psychoanalysis being a method for incorporating the contents of the "repressed" shadow back into a healthy ego. Wilber also identifies William Glasser's "Reality Therapy" and the approach of "Transactional Analysis" as examples of therapies that address the persona level of consciousness.

Wilber's next level down the "ladder" of expanding consciousness is referred to as the ego level. If we can heal the split between the persona and the alienated shadow, we end up with a larger and more stable sense of identity referred to as the ego. At this level we have successfully dissolved the boundary between the accepted and rejected aspects of ourselves and thus own, or "take back", our projections, resulting in a more complete

understanding of our larger identity. However, at this level there still remain numerous boundaries between our limited ego consciousness and the expansiveness of unity consciousness. The key boundary, or split, that reveals itself at this level is between the ego, or mind, and the body.

At the ego level of consciousness we literally disown the body so as to remove ourselves from the demands and suffering of the physical realm. The body becomes an object or a projection, in just the same way the shadow did. We essentially numb ourselves in order to avoid the realities and constraints of our physical body. At this level we have to face the existential issues related to the apparent finality of death and the limits of our physical being. In order to avoid the fear associated with the limitations of our physical self, we withdraw into the "safety" of our well protected intellects. To overcome this mind-body split we have to literally "breathe" awareness back into our alienated bodies and feel the wholeness of our total organism. The therapies that effectively address this level of healing are the Existential, Gestalt, and Body Focused therapies. Hatha Yoga is also noted by Grof as being an effective approach at this level.

Once the individual has effectively healed the split between the ego and the body, he or she has reached the total organism level, the level that Maslow (1970) refers to as self-actualization. The following quote by Maslow, which describes the impulse towards self-actualization, appears to be in general agreement with Wilber's view of an evolving consciousness;

> We have, all of us, an impulse toward actualizing more of our potentialities, towards self-actualization, or full humanness or human fulfillment. This is a push

> toward the establishment of the fully evolved and authentic self..., an increased stress on the role of integration (or unity, wholeness). Resolving a dichotomy into a higher, more inclusive unity amounts to healing a split in the person and making him more unified. This is also an impulse to be the best, the very best you are capable of becoming. If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life. (p.119)

If we do indeed choose to move towards self-actualization, then we will arrive at what Wilber refers to as the total organism level of consciousness. Now you might think that once we reach this level of self-actualization, after the immense struggle of realizing that the constraining boundaries of our identity were mere illusion, that we might have come to our journey's end. However, such is not the case. At the level of the total organism there still exists a false boundary. This boundary is drawn between the total organism, the unified mind/body, and the external world, or the environment. Of course, now that we have reached this level we are capable of moving beyond it, transcending and including what came before it.

According to Wilber, we can transcend the boundary of our individual body/mind both outwardly and inwardly. Outwardly, our consciousness begins to "mingle" with the external world, with the result being, for example, out-of-body experiences or the sensation of connectedness with the natural world. It appears that once we have become "one" with our bodies, with our feet firmly on the ground, the very boundary between our

feet and the ground begins to dissolve. Inwardly, we begin to connect with the transpersonal realm of what Jung (1972) called the collective unconscious.

The collective unconscious is a vast storage of primitive mythological images, or archetypes, that is essentially housed within our evolved brains. Jung's life work revolved around identifying and analyzing these archetypes. According to Jung (1973), the unconscious is the only available source of religious experience. However, Jung was not suggesting that the unconscious is identical with God, but simply the medium from which religious experience seems to flow. Jung's life work was dedicated to helping individuals tap into an awareness of the unconscious so that they might be able to learn to live life "mythologically." Jung believed that by doing so we open ourselves to mythological transcendence and bring that awareness into our conventional world. This awareness of transcendence acts to revitalize our existence by connecting it to a source infinitely deeper than our personal self.

When the primary boundary between the individual , as total organism, and the environment begins to dissolve, we are moving towards the level of unity consciousness. Once we move beyond the level of total organism and approach the level of unity consciousness, we begin to encounter what Wilber refers to as the transpersonal bands (see figure 1). It is within the transpersonal bands that the individual begins to breakthrough to the previously described no-boundary awareness. No-boundary awareness is depicted as the ultimate state of consciousness and, as such, it includes all of the other levels of consciousness. A spiritual experience, or peak experience, is seen as a glimpse of this no-boundary awareness, or unity consciousness.

So as you can see, Wilber's work provides us with a model of consciousness that suggests that human consciousness is in a process of evolution and that spiritual experiences are temporary "breakthroughs" to an expanded state of consciousness. In his most recent book A Brief History of Everything (1996), Wilber points out that individuals at any particular stage of their growth can potentially "breakthrough" to a higher, or more expanded, state of consciousness. According to Wilber, this breakthrough can occur under various conditions, such as moments of elation, sexual passion, stress, drug-induced states, and even during psychotic breaks. However, Wilber makes a point of stressing that when a person makes a breakthrough to a higher, or expanded, state of consciousness, he or she still *returns* to their previous level of consciousness. In other words, the breakthrough is seen as a temporary "glimpse" at a higher state of consciousness, but the individual who has this experience inevitably slips back to his or her previous level after what is usually a brief period of time.

Wilber appears to be arguing that an individual may be profoundly influenced by a spiritual breakthrough experience, but the person's structure of consciousness at the time of the experience is unable to permanently accommodate the more expanded state of being. The accommodation of higher levels seems to only transpire in a step-like fashion, one step after another, as one dimension of consciousness builds on another. Wilber (1996) quotes the Indian sage, Aurobindo, on this subject of the emergence of a higher consciousness:

> The spiritual evolution obeys the logic of successive unfolding; it can take a new decisive main step only when the previous main step has been sufficiently

> conquered: even if certain minor stages can be swallowed up or leaped over by rapid ascension, the consciousness has to turn back to assure itself that the ground passed over is securely annexed to the new condition, a greater or concentrated speed [of development which is indeed possible] does not eliminate the steps themselves or the necessity of their successive surmounting. (p.151)

Before I move on to some more phenomenologically oriented research, I want to consider next an alternative model of human transpersonal development offered by Washburn (1995).

Washburn's Alternative Model

Washburn's (1995) work offers us a contrast between Wilber's model of consciousness, which Washburn suggests is based on a structural-hierarchical paradigm, and Washburn's own model which is described as relying on a dynamic-dialectical paradigm. Washburn credits Jung as being the originator of the dynamic-dialectical paradigm, although Washburn's own thesis clearly moves beyond Jung's writings on the subject. In contrast to Wilber's model described previously where an individual moves up a hierarchy to higher, more complete levels of consciousness ultimately arriving at unity consciousness, Washburn suggests that development takes a spiral course that alternates between two poles that constitute the psyche. These two poles are referred to as the ego and the Dynamic Ground.

Washburn (1995) provides the following description of the two poles of the psyche;

> The egoic pole is the seat of the ego, of ego functions (reality testing, self-control, reflective self-awareness, operational cognition), and of personal, that is, biographical, experience. In contrast, the non-egoic pole is the seat of the Dynamic Ground (libido, psychic energy, numinous power or spirit), of somatic, instinctual, affective, and creative-imaginal potentials, and of collective (inherited) memories, complexes, archetypes. (p.11)

Both Washburn's and Wilber's model are transpersonal in that they divide development into three main phases: preegoic, egoic and transegoic (Washburn, 1995). The issue that really distinguishes the two models from each other is centered around the conceptualization of the ego. From Wilber's perspective, which draws on Eastern philosophical traditions, the ego is essentially an *illusion*, a transition structure that dissolves in the process of evolving towards the ultimate state of unity consciousness. The ego is depicted as a "mistaken identity." This mistaken or false identity is seen as an incomplete subset of the all-inclusive identification with the "true reality" of unity consciousness. From this perspective the individual's developmental goal is to awaken to the fact that the small-s self, the ego, is simply a temporary psychic structure that we eventually shed in our progress towards unity consciousness.

In Washburn's model, however, the small-s self of the ego is "an actually existing self but not a complete self." In other words, the ego is seen as a pseudo-independent and basic structure of the psyche that is not merely an illusion but is actually the lesser pole of a bi-polar duality. From this perspective the development of consciousness is governed by a dialectical interplay between the two poles, that is, between the ego and the Dynamic

Ground. This interplay between the Dynamic Ground, which is depicted as the original, deeper, and potentially higher self, and the ego, which is seen as a secondary and lesser, but still essential, self, eventually progresses to an integrated duality of selfhood.

In contrasting the differences between Washburn's dynamic-dialectical model and Wilber's structural-hierarchical model, we are left with a choice between two selves or none. Washburn's model sees development as ultimately leading to a goal in which two selves are united as one, the higher self of the Dynamic Ground and the lower self of the ego. Wilber's model, in contrast, provides a perspective that suggests that development ultimately brings us to state that lies beyond all selfhood, a state where the illusion of self is transcended and finally dispelled.

Both Washburn's and Wilber's models of consciousness are theoretical and as such may be divorced from the experiential or phenomenological level of human experience. Stanislav Grof, whose work I will review below, actually provides us with clinical research on the levels of consciousness outlined by Wilber's model.

Stanislav Grof: A New Cartography of the Human Psyche

Stanislav Grof, who was trained as a medical doctor, has spent the last thirty years of his professional life exploring the theoretical and practical significance of non-ordinary states of consciousness. The first twenty years of his work focused almost exclusively on the nature of consciousness, and the human psyche, as it is revealed through the use of LSD and other psychedelic substances. Grof has reported that the spectrum of experiences induced by psychedelic compounds is practically indistinguishable from those induced by

various nondrug techniques, such as chanting, monotonous dancing, fasting, sensory isolation, sleep deprivation and breathing or respiratory procedures (Grof, 1988). He also notes that nonordinary states of consciousness, whether they are drug or nondrug induced, are characteristically similar in quality to both nonordinary states of consciousness that occur spontaneously in everyday life and to NDEs, or near-death experiences.

In the last ten years Grof has been working with new techniques, under the heading of "holotropic therapy," that he claims can safely and simply induce practically the whole spectrum of nonordinary states previously accessed through psychedelic drugs. He combines a particular method of controlled breathing with music and other types of sound technology, focused body work, and drawing, to induce transformative and mystical experiences. Through years of exploring the content of these drug and "naturally" induced experiences, Grof has developed a cartography, or map, of the human psyche that reaches well beyond the limits of the model provided by traditional psychology.

Grof (1988) suggests that the traditional model of the human psyche is limited to personal biography and the individual unconscious as described by Sigmund Freud. Grof argues that this model attends to only one level of the human psyche, which he refers to as the biographical-recollective level. He argues that this single level model is inadequate for understanding the dynamics of emotional and psychosomatic healing that occur when individuals experience the profound impact of certain nonordinary states of consciousness. Grof's extended model of the human psyche includes two additional levels that he describes as "transbiographical." These levels are referred to as the *perinatal* domain and the *transpersonal* domain.

According to Grof, the experiences that belong to the recollective-biographical level of the human psyche, the level which is attended to by traditional psychotherapy, are related to significant biographical events and circumstances of the life of the individual from birth to the present. Unresolved conflict, trauma, and repressed memory emerge from this level and can be processed using a variety of psychotherapeutic methods. Beyond this level, Grof has reported that individuals can experience dramatically intense encounters with a sequence of events that mirror biological birth and death. These experiential sequences can be induced using both drug and non-drug exploratory methods and may even be encountered in spontaneous nonordinary states of consciousness. According to Grof, death and rebirth experiences are clearly related and deeply connected to the clinical stages of childbirth and are typically intertwined or associated with many mythological, mystical, archetypal and transpersonal experiences. Grof's extensive research of these experiences strongly supports the proposition that reliving the trauma of birth or facing "psychological" death can be associated with profound healing and personal growth.

Grof's research reveals that beyond the perinatal dimension of the human psyche lies the transpersonal dimension. According to Grof (1988), transpersonal experience can be defined as an "experiential expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual boundaries of the body-ego and beyond the limitations of time and space" (p.38). Grof provides us with a taxonomy of transpersonal experience that he believes adequately reflects the introspective data and objective observations from modern consciousness research. He divides transpersonal experiences into three general categories:

1) Experiential Extension Within Consensus Reality, 2) Experiential Extension Beyond Consensus Reality and Space-Time, and 3) Transpersonal Experiences of a Psychoid Nature.

In the first general category of transpersonal experiences described by Grof, there is an extension of spatial boundaries beyond the individual's mind/body. This transcendence of spatial boundaries can lead to an experiential identification with persons, animals, or even objects, and can *even* be experienced as an identification with the entire universe itself. Grof provides striking accounts of individuals identifying with other people, where the person essentially assumes the identity and consciousness of another person. He also provides accounts of individuals experientially identifying with various animals. This identification includes the body image, specific physiological sensations, instinctual drives, and the animals' unique perception of the environment and emotional reactions to it. Perhaps the most spectacular example of transcending one's boundaries involves the expansion of consciousness to include planetary consciousness or the even rarer experience of identification with the entire physical universe. All of the above states of consciousness as well as those identified as Near Death Experiences, are included in this first category of transpersonal experiences.

Within this first category of transpersonal experiences, Grof also includes states of consciousness that appear to transcend the boundaries of linear time. These experiences may involve a regression to what Grof refers to as "concrete and realistic episodes of fetal and embryonal memories" (1988, p. 74). Sometimes the historical regression goes even further and the individual has a convinced feeling of reliving memories from the lives of his

or her ancestors, or even drawing on the memory banks of the racial or collective unconscious. Grof suggests that when such sequences are associated with a sense of personal memory from one's spiritual rather than biological history, we can refer to them as *karmic* or past incarnation experiences. Grof (1988) has the following to say about past incarnation experiences:

> The persons who experience karmic phenomena often gain amazing insights into the time and culture involved and occasionally into specific historical events. In some instances, it is beyond any doubt that they could have possibly acquired this information in the conventional way, through the ordinary sensory channels. In this sense, past life memories are true transpersonal experiences that share with the other transpersonal phenomena the capacity to provide instant and direct extrasensory access to information about the world. (p. 89)

In the second general category of transpersonal experience, which Grof labels "Experiential Extension Beyond Consensus Reality and Space-Time," the extension of consciousness seems to go beyond the phenomenal world and the space-time continuum as we perceive it in our everyday life. According to Grof this category includes "certain astral-psychic phenomena, such as apparitions of and communication with deceased people or experiences of the chakras, auras, meridians, and other subtle energetic manifestations" (p.103). Grof provides the following account as an example of an encounter of telepathic communication with a deceased person. The example involves a fellow researcher and colleague of Grof's, Walter N. Pahnke, who apparently worked with

many famous mediums and psychics, including his friend Eilleen Garrett, who is a past president of the American Parapsychological Association;

> In summer 1971, Walter went with his wife Eva and his children for a vacation in a cabin in Maine, situated right on the ocean. One day, he went scuba diving all by himself and did not return from the ocean. An extensive and well-organized search failed to find his body or any part of his diving gear. Under these circumstances, Eva found it very difficult to accept and integrate his death....It was hard for her to believe he was not part of her life anymore and to start a new chapter of her existence without a sense of closure of the preceding one. Being a psychologist herself, she qualified for an LSD training session for mental health professionals offered through a special program in our institute. She decided to have a psychedelic session with the hope of getting some more insights and asked me to be her sitter. In the second half of the session, she had a very powerful vision of Walter and carried on a long and meaningful dialogue with him. He gave her specific instructions concerning each of their three children and released her to start a new life of her own unencumbered and unrestricted by a sense of commitment to his memory. It was a very profound and liberating experience.
>
> Just as Eva was questioning whether the entire episode was just a wishful fabrication of her own mind, Walter appeared once more for a brief period of time with the following request: "I forgot one thing, would you please do me a favor and return a book that I borrowed from a friend of mine. It is in my study in the attic." And he proceeded to give her the name of the friend, the name of the book,

> the shelf, and the sequential order of the book on this shelf. Following the instructions, Eva was actually able to find and return the book, about the existence of which she had no previous knowledge.
>
> It would certainly have been completely consistent with Walter's lifelong search for scientific proof of paranormal phenomena to add a concrete and testable piece of information to his interaction with Eva to dispel her doubts. Earlier during his life, he had made an agreement with Eileen Garrett that she would try to give him, after her death, unquestionable proof of the existence of the beyond. (1988, P.109 -110)

Included in this category is the so-called "kundalini" phenomenon, which has been extensively described within the Indian spiritual traditions (Krishna, 1993). Kundalini refers to the activation of energy in the body that rises up from the base of the spine and leads to the opening, or "lighting up," of the body's psychic centers, or *chakras*. Chakras, a Sanskrit word for wheels, are hypothetical centers within the body that radiate primal energy. The centers roughly correspond to certain levels of the spinal cord and are associated with specific organs of the body. Most systems identify seven chakras; root, genital, navel, heart, throat, brow and crown (Grof, 1988). The rising of kundalini energy in the body can be accompanied by dramatic physical and psychological manifestations which are described in the Indian literature as *kriyas*. The most noteworthy of these manifestations are powerful sensations of heat and energy streaming up the spine. These sensations are accompanied by intense emotions of various kinds, tremors, spasms, violent shaking and complex twisting movements. In addition, the phenomenon commonly

includes involuntary laughing or crying, chanting of mantras and songs, talking in tongues, emitting of vocal noises and animal sounds, and assuming spontaneous yoga gestures and postures (Grof, 1988).

Grof's third general category of transpersonal experiences, which he describes as experiences of a "Psychoid Nature," includes what Jung called synchronicity, which are meaningful coincidences of events separated in time and/or space. This category also includes the following; supernormal physical feats, recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (poltergeist), unidentified flying objects, and spiritual healing and hexing. These experiences seem to be more related to paranormal phenomenon and, as such, are not as relevant to the present study.

Remember that Grof's exploration into the transpersonal realm was carried out primarily through LSD research and was augmented by research with nondrug, "holotropic breathwork" methods. For this reason some people might simply discount his results as inconsequential epiphenomenon related to the effects of powerful hallucinogenics. However, Grof would argue that his explorations of consciousness reveal the potential of the human psyche experience and, from his perspective, the contents of the induced transpersonal episodes are not products of the drugs but instead are the experienced "reality" of an expanded state of consciousness. Grof (1990) has the following to say about the subject;

> It was becoming increasingly evident that LSD and similar substances did not produce any psychological contents through their pharmacological effects. They were best understood as unspecific catalysts - agents that energize the psyche and

> facilitate the manifestation of previously unconscious contents. This was further confirmed by the fact that such experiences could also be found in various perennial maps of cultures that used not psychedelics but powerful non-pharmacological methods for changing consciousness. (p. 143)

The results and implications of Grof's research are mind boggling and may even be threatening to an individual's otherwise stable worldview. The existence and nature of transpersonal experiences seem to violate the most basic assumptions of mechanistic science. Grof's research suggests that our individual experience of consciousness can quite literally expand beyond the limits of our mind/body and "enter," or become one with, the material world, as well as moving beyond the material world and the associated space-time constraints. In the results reported by Grof, consciousness begins to appear more like an energy form that is part of the substance of the universe itself, as opposed to an experience exclusively limited to individual sentient beings.

Another modern day researcher of altered states of consciousness, Yvonne Kason, has coined the term "Spiritually Transformative Experiences," or STEs, to describe these apparent expansion of consciousness experiences. Unlike Wilber, who takes an essentially theoretical view of nonordinary states of consciousness, and Grof, whose work focuses on inducing nonordinary states, Kason's work examines first hand accounts from people who have frequently encountered these transformative experiences in their day to day life. We will examine her work next.

Yvonne Kason and STEs

Yvonne Kason is a practicing Canadian physician whose own dramatic near-death experience in a plane crash initiated her interest in the study of nonordinary states of consciousness. Her book, A Farther Shore (1994), examines first hand accounts of mystical visions, near-death episodes, kundalini awakenings and inspired creativity, and offers specific strategies for those people who may be struggling through a process of spiritual transformation. After years of studying Spiritually Transformative Experiences, or STEs, Kason has come to the believe that these experiences are part of a transformation and expansion of consciousness in which the individual becomes intermittently capable of perceiving other levels of reality, including what may be considered mystical or paranormal dimensions.

Kason notes that STEs can differ greatly in intensity, ranging from an inspired moment of spontaneous creativity to a potentially overwhelming transformative encounter with a classic kundalini episode. She refers to the extremely powerful transformative experiences as STE peaks or STEPs. A STEP is described as a discrete, time-limited episode that is intensely absorbing or even overwhelming. Kason's research indicates that once an individual has had an STE the person is very likely to experience other STEs, or the more intense STEPs, throughout their lifetime. In general, Kason believes that encounters with STEs are part of a spiritual awakening or journey and that, although everyone seems to be on a spiritual journey, those who are having STEs may be on an accelerated journey.

Since Kason's abrupt and dramatic initiation into the world of spiritual experience she has worked professionally with and/or counselled more than 300 people who have reported a wide variety of STEs. Of this sample, Kason found that almost all of them had encountered some type of mystical experience. Kason (1994) describes six general categories or types of mystical experience as follows:

1) **Unitive Experiences**: A feeling of union with God, the universal consciousness, or with the universal life energy; an experience of oneness of all things; a feeling that one's self is united with the entire universe or merging with all creation.

2) **Bliss Episodes**: Experiences of profound bliss, all-encompassing love, awe-struck wonder at the profundity of the universe, or overwhelming feelings of devotion to the Divine, all of which are accompanied by spontaneous tears of joy.

3) **Mystical Visions**: Visions of deities, saints, gurus, spiritual archetypes, or important persons from the world's religions, including Buddha, Christ, Krishna, Mohammed, Moses, and the Virgin Mary.

4) **Expansive Episodes**: A sense of dramatically expanded consciousness in which the individual point of perception seems to expand from its normal to a much greater size; the sense of expansion may stop at a few feet beyond the head or move outward until it seems to encompass the entire earth or even the cosmos.

5) **Spiritual Rebirth**: A sudden, profound spiritual awakening; a spontaneous religious conversion, a dramatic reorientation of spiritual beliefs, a sense of "dying"

or having a shamanistic type of encounter with the dark side that is followed by a profound experience of spiritual rebirth.

6) **Illumination**: A sudden, profound insight into the nature of the universe or absolute truth; a spontaneous intellectual revelation that is beyond the bounds of normal, and analytical reason that brings with it new insight or new knowledge for humankind. (p. 30-31)

In her research of STEs, Kason came across a number of individuals who seemed to be describing signs of what she describes as a "classic kundalini awakening." Kundalini is the Indian term for a dramatic sequence of experiences that seem to present themselves as a syndrome, or collection of characteristic symptoms. Kason provides the following summary of the classic symptoms;

1) **Light**: The perceptions of inner light, radiating light, and/or luminosity in the outer world; the sensation of being engulfed in an overwhelming brilliant white light.

2) **Sound**: The perception of an inner sound - a humming or ringing - often likened to the rushing of wind, the distant roar of a waterfall, the rushing of wings, the buzzing of bees, or the chirping of crickets; sometimes called the music of the "spheres."

3) **Energy Rushes**: Sensations of energy, heat, or light that rise up the spine or rush up the body toward the head.

4) Sexual Sensations: Sensations of activity in the genital area or unusual intense sexual arousal that are not associated with normal sexual stimulation; spontaneous orgasms that seem to be directed inward and upward rather them outward.

5) Experiences of Paranormal Consciousness: The above sensations associated, ultimately, with mystical experiences, psychic awakenings, spontaneous experiences of intense creativity or revelation, and/or an explosion or expansion of consciousness. (Kason, 1994, p. 45)

A classic kundalini awakening, as Kason refers to it, appears to be a profound alteration of consciousness. This awakening certainly appears more dramatic in nature than the brief "glimpses" of transpersonal awareness that have been described earlier. Kason provides the following illustrative account of a kundalini awakening that was described to her by a physician of family medicine referred to as Gwen;

> I had just had a relaxing supper with a close friend one Saturday evening. I had been studying and in a very intense state of concentration for most of the day. In fact, throughout my university education, and especially during medical school, I studied very intensely, and frequently went into almost trance-like states of absorption during my studies. I think all this intense absorption and concentration is what inadvertently stimulated my kundalini.
>
> That evening, after the supper, I discovered that I had an intense pressure headache. My friend suggested that he try giving me a head massage to relieve the headache. I sat down in a comfortable position, and he began to massage my scalp.

Suddenly, my whole body started shaking uncontrollably. I felt rushes of energy coursing up my body to my head, and my whole body jerked with the pulses of energy. My back, arms, and legs all jerked repeatedly as the energy pulse raced upwards, I could not stop the shaking. My body was rocked and shaken by these energy pulses from about 9:30 p.m. until 3:30 a.m.. I was fully conscious the whole time, and was acutely aware of what was happening in my body.

I was very frightened during the shaking episode. I had no idea what was going on. I could not control my body...I shouted out to my friend, asking was happening. He did not know, and he just sat with me to comfort me. I knew it could not be a seizure, because I was fully conscious throughout the whole episode. Later I found it interesting that my headache had disappeared as soon as the energy pulses began. When the energy rushes and body shaking finally stopped, I felt overwhelmingly fatigued, as if I had experienced a tremendous relief of some sort. I crawled into bed and went to sleep immediately.

In the morning when I awoke, I felt as if I had been reborn. When I opened my eyes, the world seemed to have become a magical place. I felt as if I were in love with the world, and that the universe and I were making love to each other. It seemed as if the world was filled with light; all the colors and dimensions of objects seemed clearer and more beautiful. Every sensation was enhanced. It was as if I were breathing in the life energy of the universe with each breath. I felt as if my consciousness had expanded to immense proportions, and I felt totally at one

with the entire universe. I felt the oneness of all things, and I felt that all was well in the Divine plan of the universe. (Kason, 1994, pg.51-52)

Gwen goes on to describe how this experience left her in what she refers to as an expanded state of consciousness for about six months. After the six months her consciousness seemed to contract to a state that was just somewhat larger than her original state of consciousness. She states that during the six months of expanded consciousness she spontaneously developed psychic abilities and was able to perceive emotional and physical problems in others. Gwen also reports that people told her they experienced a healing of their pain when she would lay her hands on a painful part of their body. Understandably, this kundalini type experience made a profound impact on the way Gwen perceives and acts in the world. She states that to this day she still experiences recurrent energy surges in her body, but not to the extent that she did on that first evening.

Kason (1994) also describes a number of physical and psychological symptoms that are associated with Spiritually Transformative Experiences, with the most dramatic and potentially debilitating being those that are related to the kundalini experience. She notes that there are numerous undiagnosable body pains, metabolic changes, sleep disturbances, energy fluctuations, changes in sexual energy, and mood disturbances, that are often associated with STEs. It is important to keep this aspect of the overall experience in mind, as there is a tendency to think of the reported experiences as all "bliss and light," and this is clearly not the case. The physical and psychological distress associated with STEs can often be misdiagnosed by both traditional medical practitioners and mental health professionals. A diagnosis of psychosomatic or mental illness can add

significantly to the distress that individuals who are experiencing STEs may encounter. Grof's (1990) book The Stormy Search for the Self is a guide book for those who are experiencing a "spiritual emergency," Grof's term for the intense physical and emotional crisis that often accompanies a spiritual awakening.

Before I move on to a summary of the literature thus far reviewed, I would like to address one more piece of contemporary research which, according to the authors, has as its goal a phenomenological understanding of spirituality.

Elkins and His Components of Spirituality

David Elkins and his associates from the Psychology Department of Pepperdine University initiated a research project aimed at defining, describing and measuring spirituality (Elkins et al., 1988). According to Elkins et al.;

> Our objective was to delineate a humanistic definition, description, and assessment approach to spirituality that would promote clearer understanding of spirituality and that would be sensitive to the spirituality of those not affiliated with traditional religion. (p. 7).

In their attempt to define and describe spirituality, the Pepperdine researchers reviewed the classic works on spirituality that were written from a phenomenological perspective. They sampled the writings of John Dewey, William James, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Martin Buber, and Viktor Frankl, to name a few, and came up with a preliminary list of several factors they felt constituted the core dimensions of what is meant by "spirituality."

The research group then carried out some "informal validation" of their factors, or "components of spirituality," by interviewing several persons whom they considered to be highly spiritual. The interviewees responded positively to the "components" derived from the literature and apparently gave concrete examples of the factors from their own lives. From this research the group formulated a definition of spirituality based on the literature, and a more operationalized definition which views spirituality as a multidimensional construct consisting of nine major components. Their formulated definition of spirituality, based on a historical review of phenomenological reports by major writers in the field, was as follows:

> Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, spiritus, meaning "breath of life," is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate. (p. 10)

The definition of spirituality as a multidimensional construct consisting of nine major components would be too lengthy to report in its entirety but I will list the components:

1) Transcendent Dimension
2) Meaning and Purpose in Life
3) Mission in Life
4) Sacredness of Life
5) Material Values
6) Altruism
7) Idealism
8) Awareness of the Tragic
9) Fruits of Spirituality

Elkins and his fellow researchers argue that their definition of spirituality identifies a universal human experience which is not the same as religiosity. The suggestion is made that further research is required to understand this universal "humanistic spirituality." They conclude that psychotherapists need to expand their awareness concerning this spiritual dimension in order to be fully prepared to address the spiritual issues their clients may be confronting.

There are a number of apparent weaknesses in the Elkins et al., (1988) study. First of all, although they state that their approach to the subject is a phenomenological one, their goals are oriented towards a positivist, natural science approach. Two of the three stated objectives of the study , definition and measurement, are more in line with natural science research. In addition, the researchers do not focus on an examination of the immediate or pre-reflective level of spiritual experience, which is really the cornerstone of the phenomenological approach. The phenomenological method remains as close as possible to the actual lived-experience. In contrast, the above researchers focused on the behavioral and reflective level of spiritual experience. The result of their research is a description of some of the beliefs and behaviors that are associated with spirituality. Nevertheless, the study does reveal some interesting themes associated with the spiritual dimension of human experience and attempts to provide some parameters to the experience.

Summary

As was stated in the introduction to this chapter, in the study of spiritual experience there are three central issues that are consistently addressed. The first issue has to do with the claims to knowledge accorded to spiritual or religious experience, the second issue addresses the question of human consciousness and what spiritual experiences tell us about consciousness, and the third issue focuses on the actual description of spiritual perception, or the quality of the spiritual experience itself.

In reference to the first issue I touched on the historical debate of whether religious experience is a more a matter of feeling or thinking. This debate eventually focuses on the relative superiority of subjectivity vs. objectivity. I asserted that the phenomenological approach transcends this issue insisting instead that making distinctions between feeling and thinking and between the person and the world, are essentially unnecessary and misleading. Following this discussion I introduced the concept of "sensed-meaning." The question of whether feeling comes first and thinking follows brings up the interesting topic of whether religious beliefs are exclusively "socially constructed" or are products of spiritual experiences themselves.

The issue of socially constructed meaning is related to the current meta-theoretical debate concerning modernism vs. postmodernism. Although postmodernism comes in various forms, the most radical voice comes from the, so called, "deconstructive postmodernists," who argue that all meaning is "socially produced." The deconstructive postmodernist position rejects all "meta-narratives," or supposedly universal

representations of reality, and insists that all meaning is culturally created and determined in particular, localized circumstances about which no generalizations can be made (Spretnak, 1991). From this perspective, it would appear that the creation of meaning is entirely dependent on human "discourse," and, as such, the creation of meaning is completely relative, and, as such, *groundless*. In other words, this position seems to deny that there can be any inherent cross cultural commonalties to human experience, spiritual or otherwise. This issue of the construction of meaning and the claims to knowledge that may be accorded to spiritual experience will be reexamined in the discussion section of the study.

The second issue that is consistently addressed in the literature focuses on the question of what these spiritual experiences reveal to us about the nature of human consciousness. From the sample of literature reviewed above, the authors appear to be in general agreement that spiritual experiences are momentary breakthroughs to an expanded state of consciousness. Remarkably, a number of the authors also seem to have come to the conclusion that consciousness itself is expanding as part of an evolutionary process. As we have seen, Wilber's (1977/1996) work provides us with a theoretical model of a spectrum of consciousness, and Grof's (1988;1990) clinical research provides us with a map that was generated through direct observations of the various states of consciousness. We have also seen how some researchers and practitioners have focused on the healing potential of altered states, as well as the disorientation and stress that may be associated with a process of spiritual awakening.

Finally, the third issue that the literature addresses, that of the quality of spiritual experience itself, is the one that is most clearly related to the primary goal of the present study, that goal being to utilize the phenomenological method to examine the lived experience of spirituality. In the literature that was reviewed, from James to Watts to Maslow, and to the current research of Yvonne Kason, the description of the qualitative themes associated with spiritual experience appear to be strikingly similar. In other words, there definitely appears to be some common identifiable elements or characteristics that are associated with spiritual experiences. Once I have presented the phenomenological analysis of spiritual experience in the present study, we can compare the results that I have gathered with the characteristics provided in the literature. However, before I move on to the results, the next chapter provides an introduction to the philosophical roots that underlie the phenomenological method of inquiry.

Chapter 3

Philosophy of Method

This chapter focuses on the philosophical foundations that underlie the phenomenological method of research. The philosophy underlying the method has implications both for the research procedures themselves and the interpretation of the research results or data that follow. Once I have mapped out the general philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method, I turn, in Chapter Four, to the specific methodological approach and procedures which I chose to apply for the present study.

However, before I begin to examine the highly complex and intellectually challenging subject of the philosophy of phenomenology let me make the following comments. It has been my experience with the field of phenomenology that the more I begin to understand the subtle nuances of meaning associated with the study of experience and consciousness, the more complex and deeper the "journey" becomes. The study of experience itself brings us face to face with the "big," and indeed spiritual, questions of our very "being." It seems characteristic of the phenomenological inquiry that there is always another question to be asked whenever one appears to have found an answer.

Philosophical Foundations

It is not my intention here to go into a lengthy discussion on the emergence of the human science perspective or to provide a defense of its accompanying methodology. I think it is safe to say that, at least in the field of psychology, the human sciences have

securely arrived at a place of acceptance and respectability. The human science perspective, with its accompanying method of qualitative research, has allowed researchers the opportunity to explore areas of human experience that were previously inaccessible due to the epistemological claims and methodological constraints of natural science (Collaizi 1978; Valle & King, 1978).

In order to situate myself more narrowly within the philosophical landscape, I would place the approach of the present study under the heading of existential-phenomenology. Specifically, existential-phenomenological psychology is a discipline that has evolved in an attempt to reveal our previously "unknowable" subjective experience and validate the knowledge gained from the study of experience as part of a legitimate human science endeavor. Valle and King (1978) provide the following definition of existential-phenomenological psychology:

> ...that psychological discipline which seeks to explicate the essence, structure or form of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially descriptive techniques including disciplined reflection. (p.7)

Valle and King (1978) provide an overview of how the philosophy of existentialism and the methodology of phenomenology have evolved and blended together, creating an alternative to traditional behavioral psychology. Existentialism is a philosophy which concerns itself with understanding the human condition as it manifests itself in our concrete, lived situations. The existentialist is interested in the introspective, subjective and most subtle of experiences, such as the feeling of joy, indifference or absurdity. Some of the key historical proponents of existentialism include Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich

Nietzsche, and Feodor Dostoevski, and in the present century we have the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus.

The methodology of phenomenology, as founded by Edmund Husserl, became an almost perfect complement to existentialism as a means of exploring the subjectivity of lived-experience (Valle & King, 1978). Husserl's central insight was that *consciousness is intentional*, in other words, consciousness is always "of something"(Osborne, 1990). As such, we are fundamentally oriented towards a world of emergent meaning (von Eckartsberg, 1986).

Husserl was interested in the world of immediate experience as it is expressed in everyday language. His life work was dedicated to a pursuit of revealing and describing the *inherent character* of conscious experience (Osborne, 1992). The word "inherent" is important in this context, in that Husserl believed, and argued, that there are clearly commonalties in the way we humans experience phenomena. In other words, there may be variations in reported descriptions of experience but there is inevitably a common, or essential, theme amongst these variations.

Let me provide the following example. One person might describe her perception of a painting in glowing terms of appreciation, while another finds the same painting quite unpleasant to the eye. If we were to interview both of them in depth, we would find, however, that there are some common underlying themes in the "immediate" perception and experience of the painting. Where one person might describe the painting as "quiet" and "peaceful" and another as "dull" and "lifeless", both of the critics seem to be responding to a quality of "movement", or lack of it, in their experience of the painting.

Therefore, responding to the quality of perceptual movement may be an inherent character of conscious experience. Husserl argued that by uncovering the common underlying themes in the description of an experience we could reveal the *essence* of the phenomenon under study. The essence, or essential meaning of a phenomenon, is revealed by uncovering the invariant, or necessary and sufficient, constitutive features of the phenomenon (Wertz, 1986).

For Husserl, the nature of human consciousness is that of the *Lebenswelt* or *life-world.* The life-world is the place where the world and the person come together, it is the world of immediately encountered experience, the taken-for-granted world of everyday life (Natanson, 1964). Consciousness, or the life-world, is the world as lived by the person and not the external reality which might be considered separate or independent of the individual. For Husserl external reality can only be apprehended through consciousness. Husserl argued that the essence of a phenomenon, that appears to us through consciousness, can be grasped by utilizing a process described as bracketing. Bracketing requires that we suspend our preconceptions and presuppositions concerning the phenomenon under study.

Husserl's early work is described as pure phenomenology and his later work as transcendental phenomenology (Stapleton, 1983). With pure phenomenology Husserl is primarily focused on how knowledge is constituted in human consciousness. In this phase of his work, Husserl's descriptive method focused upon how external reality reveals itself through intentional acts of consciousness (Osborne, 1992). With transcendental phenomenology, Husserl continues to assert that we cannot escape human consciousness,

or the life-world, but we can transcend the individual ego and apprehend the universal nature of phenomena as they appear to an essentially "anonymous" consciousness. Through a rigorous process of bracketing and reduction, Husserl asserted that we could achieve *presuppositionless knowing* (Stapleton, 1983).

Heidegger and Interpretive Phenomenology

There appear to be two main branches of twentieth century phenomenology (Stapleton, 1983). The primary branch, from an historical perspective, is the pure and transcendental phenomenology as founded by Husserl. The second branch is hermeneutic, or interpretive, phenomenology associated with the work of Heidegger. It is over the issue of transcending the ego, which is discussed above, where it seems that Heidegger and other interpretive or existential phenomenologists part ways with Husserl's phenomenology. Heidegger did not support Husserl's attempt to achieve presuppositionless knowing through a process of bracketing and argued that this final "reduction" was dispensable. Whereas Husserl focused on trying to uncover the "objective in the subjective", Heidegger argued that even this "split" was misleading (Osborne, 1992).

For Heidegger and other so-called interpretive phenomenolgists, each individual and his or her world are said to co-constitute one another (Valle & King, 1978). This perspective envisions a total, indissoluble unity between the individual and his or her world. This is similar to Husserl's concept of the Lebenswelt, with the difference being that the interpretive phenomenologist does not expect to reveal the universals of

experience in consciousness. In other words, Husserl's efforts were aimed at finding the universals in human consciousness while Heidegger challenged the very concept of universals.

One of the implications for the above noted differences in the views of Husserl and Heidegger is that those researchers who side more with Heidegger's views, that of interpretive phenomenology, tend to show more interest in the variations of interpretation of a phenomenon, rather than looking solely for the commonalties or universals of experience. From the interpretive phenomenologist's perspective there is a greater interest and emphasis on the individual's unique existential experience, the individual's being-in-the-world, and how that unique being-in-the-world has created novel meaning that is contextually bound (von Eckartsberg, 1986). Therefore, the interpretive phenomenologist would also be interested in the meaning attributed to "uncharacteristic" reports of a reported experience as well as the common or characteristic reports.

From this interpretive perspective variations in reported experience are a product of each individual's unique interactive relationship with the world. Heidegger described an "anticipatory dimension" of human existential experience, where our present experience anticipates, and thereby influences, what is to come (Osborne, 1992). From this perspective our "contact" with the world is one in which we "construct" our personal reality as we actively and purposively engage with the world. The concept of "foreunderstanding"(Wertz, 1984) in contemporary psychological research is analogous to Heidegger's anticipatory dimension of being.

Description vs. Interpretation

Bringing the previous discussion into a more current context, we find that this historical debate between Husserl and Heidegger is still unresolved both within the general field of philosophy and the narrower domain of phenomenological psychology. Giorgi (1992), who may be described as a key spokesperson for descriptive phenomenology, acknowledges that hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology has become the predominant contemporary approach to phenomenological research. Giorgi recognizes that the philosophical foundations of the interpretive perspective, as developed by Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricouer and Taylor, among others, are generally more in line with the meta-theoretical paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. However, Giorgi (1992) and Mohanty (1989) argue that the descriptive approach to phenomenology has often been misunderstood and that both descriptive and interpretive approaches to phenomenological research are legitimate and valuable in their own right.

The most significant issue of disagreement between the descriptive and interpretive approaches concerns the question of whether the analysis of conscious experience, and the analysis of co-researchers' reported experience, is more accurately labeled a descriptive process or an interpretive process. Giorgi (1992) contrasts the differences between description and interpretation, stating that;

> ...description is the clarification of the meaning of the objects of experience precisely as experienced. Interpretation would be the clarification of the meaning of experienced objects in terms of a plausible but contingently adopted theoretical perspective, assumption, hypothesis and so on. (p. 122)

Giorgi's approach (1985) emphasizes the description of the contents of pre-reflective consciousness. The descriptive approach to phenomenology rests on the theoretical assumption that our personal biases and interpretations can be transcended through a suspension of our pre-suppositions. For Giorgi (1992) and Mohanty (1989), and others who adhere to descriptive phenomenology, it is possible for the researcher to describe the meaning of experience without providing an interpretation. With the descriptive approach to phenomenology the researcher attempts to stay as close to the data as possible, describing what presents itself *precisely* as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it. The following quote from Giorgi (1992) effectively captures this conceptualization;

> The descriptive scientist believes that the unified meaning can be teased out and described precisely as it presents itself, not in order to substitute for the variety but as a means of accounting for it. In other words, it is the very structure, "variations of an identical meaning" or "unified variations", that matters and not variations as opposed to unity. (p.123)

A proponent of the interpretive approach to phenomenology would undoubtedly counter the above argument with the assertion that all descriptions are a form of interpretation. From this perspective, even a rigorous, well bracketed description of the pre-reflective level of immediate experience is affected by our previous experience and interaction with the world. In this conceptualization, there is no purely "naive" level of contact with the world. We cannot escape interpretation because we each have a unique, co-constituted, situational perspective "in-the-world".

The Researcher's Perspective

From the two schools of phenomenology described above, or perhaps I should say interpreted above, I would have to put myself more squarely in the second camp, that of interpretive phenomenology. It seems to me that as soon as I, as a researcher, begin to describe someone else's experience, or my own, I have to choose a particular focus. If I paraphrase, or in any way alter, the client's exact reported experience I have made an interpretation. From this perspective, the only way to provide a report on human experience without suggesting an interpretation, would be to present it verbatim. If I change even one word, I have necessarily brought in my own particular perspective, my interpretation, which has evolved through my unique interaction with the world.

In reference to the above issue, I want to make it clear that from the interpretive phenomenology perspective, this acknowledgment of the inevitability of interpretation is *not* seen as a weakness in the design or as something which the researcher should strive to overcome. Seeing things, and experiencing life, from our own unique perspective is viewed simply as an inherent quality of being human.

Now that I have clarified some of the key theoretical issues in phenomenology, let me suggest a general definition of purpose for phenomenological research. Polkinghorne (1983) describes the purpose of phenomenological research as an effort to produce, clear, precise, and systematic descriptions of the meaning that constitutes the activity of consciousness. In contrast to this statement of purpose, and in light of the above discussion, I would suggest that the purpose of phenomenological research is to produce

clear, plausible, and systematic interpretations of the meaning that constitutes the activity of consciousness.

Although there are clearly differences between the two general trends in phenomenological research, there are also similarities. In fact, on the surface of it there are more similarities between interpretive and descriptive phenomenological studies than there are differences. The interpretive approach often sets out with roughly the same goal as the descriptive approach: to provide a report on the common characteristics, or qualities, of human experience. The descriptive and interpretive approaches may employ actual research procedures which are identical. Both approaches may attempt to stay as close to the data as possible. Both approaches may be attempting to report on immediate experience, that is experience as it first appears in consciousness. However, the descriptive researcher claims that an effort is being made to produce precise descriptions of immediate experience, whereas the interpretive researcher claims that interpretations of immediate experience are being provided.

As I stated above, both the interpretive and descriptive approaches to phenomenology often have the shared goal of identifying the common characteristics, or qualities, of human experience. Proponents of the descriptive approach prefer to use the terms general structure or essence to refer to the commonality of meaning that is apparent in variations of reported experience (Giorgi, 1985). The interpretive phenomenologist may also uses the term structure to refer to commonality of reported meaning. However, in contrast to the descriptive approach, the interpretive approach steers clear of asserting that the commonality of meaning apparent across variations of reported experience reveals

the essence of the phenomenon under study. Instead the commonality of meaning associated with a phenomenon is viewed as an exposition of the "clustering" of meaning around a general theme (Stapleton, 1983). Again, the interpretive phenomenologist does not expect to reveal *universals* of experience in consciousness and therefore avoids terms such as "essence" which suggests *identical* meaning across variations of reported experience.

In the above discussion I am arguing that some interpretive and descriptive studies can look almost identical on the surface and the general purpose of the studies can be quite compatible. However, the studies can also be carried out in a radically different manner for different purposes altogether. Interpretive phenomenological researchers may not be interested in uncovering the general structure of an experienced phenomenon, instead their interest may be in the unique meaning attributed to an experience by one individual (e.g., Allapack, 1986). Interpretive research can move quite a ways from the immediate or pre-reflective level of the experience, to an abstract analysis of the reflections or interpretations associated with the experience. There seems to exist a continuum where there is variation in the effort on the part of the researcher to stay close to the data and to tie his or her interpretation of reported experience to the actual language of the co-researcher. On one end of the continuum the researcher rigorously analyzes the actual language of the participant and cautiously makes an interpretation, while at the other end the researcher interprets the data freely and loosely, going beyond the what is explicit in the reported data. It might be argued that certain kinds of interpretive research, where the researcher makes little effort to tie his or her

interpretations to the lived-world or pre-reflective level of experience, should not be realistically categorized as phenomenological research. However, I will not open this "door" as it will bring us down another winding road that is not particularly relevant to the present study.

Reliability and Validity

When comparing natural and human science research, the issues of reliability and validity are approached quite differently. Natural science research aims at objectivity through explanation, control and prediction, while human science research aims at the elucidation of meaning and understanding of human existence from the individual's subjective point of view (Osborne, 1990). Collaizi (1978) argues that objectivity is still a requirement of phenomenological research, but not the objectivity of the natural science perspective. According to Collaizi (1978):

> When someone is said to be objective, it means that his statements faithfully express what stands before him, *whatever* may be the phenomenon that he is present to; *objectivity is fidelity to phenomena.* It is a refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself. (p. 52)

Bracketing is essential for both the reliability and validity of qualitative research. As stated earlier, bracketing is basically an attempt by the researcher to articulate his or her presuppositions of the phenomenon under study. One purpose for bracketing is to make these presuppositions overt so that those who read the research may be aware of the

influence of the researcher's unique perspective. Given the researcher's orientation, the reader is then able to judge the degree to which a phenomenon of interest has been illuminated from a particular perspective (Valle and King, 1978). It is important to remember that there is no such thing as the "right" or absolute interpretation of the data. All we can do is argue a particular interpretation as persuasively as possible, supported by references to the data, and leave the final judgment to the reader.

Another reason to utilize the process of bracketing is to reveal, and make explicit, one's own preconceptions and presuppositions so that they are as clear as possible *to oneself*. Bracketing becomes a dynamic process where it seems that as the researcher identifies his or her preconceptions and presuppositions, more of these assumptions emerge at the level of reflective awareness (Valle and King, 1978).

Osborne (1990) outlines four major ways in which the validity of a phenomenological researcher's interpretations can be assessed. The first way is by the use of bracketing, which I have already discussed. The second involves doing validity checks with the participants, or co-researchers, as the work progresses. These checks involve sharing the researcher's interpretations with the participants, and adjusting the results to "fit" with the participants' reported experience. The third method is described by Osborne (1990) as the most crucial means of validating interpretations. This method involves the juridical process of presenting coherent and convincing arguments. In other words, rhetoric becomes an essential tool to convince the reader of the validity of the results. The fourth validity check is said to be dependent upon the extent to which the results *resonate* with the experiences of other people, who were not in the study, who have also

experienced the phenomenon. If this condition is met then the study is said to have achieved "empathic generalizability."

In qualitative research, reliability is a function of the researcher's ability to accurately gather, document, and organize the information provided by participants and ensure that consistency is maintained in the interpretation of the results. According to Wertz (1984), "Commonality of meaning, audibility, accuracy, and reduction, as opposed to replication of results, is the goal of qualitative research." Wertz (1986) argues that in qualitative research variations of reported experience actually help the researcher establish what features of the phenomenon remain consistent. From this perspective, apparent contradictions in participants' reports are welcomed as an opportunity to identify those aspects of the phenomenon that appear to be most stable, and therefore reliable. The importance of diverging interpretations is emphasized in the following quote from Wertz (1986):

> Phenomenologists seek discrepant sources of data hoping to displace and thereby correct the meaning revealed in the first and they welcome alternative interpretive viewpoints, but only inasmuch as they can be intuitively evidentified (sic) in a phenomenon and rigorously related to the reflections from which they diverge.

Allow me to use a personal example to demonstrate how one can "err" in reporting even his/her own experience. For instance, I might say the following; "When I'm really angry it feels like I'm out of control of myself, or, no,...now that I think of it...it feels more like I'm controlled by a part of myself that I'm not usually aware of". You can see in this example that I suggest two interpretations of my experience and one of them

appears to me to be more valid than the other. If we compared my experience of anger with other people's experience we might find that their reports concur with my second interpretation and this result would suggest that the second interpretation is a more reliable interpretation of the "*general*" experience of anger as compared to the first one.

I emphasize "general" in the above sentence because from the interpretive phenomenological perspective there is a cluster of similar meanings around a *general* theme. In other words, the experience of anger may be analyzed in terms of how it is generally experienced but this is not to suggest that the results of the analysis represent the universal nature of anger. One might ask at this point, if there is no universal standard for comparison, how can a researcher working from the interpretive phenomenological perspective ever declare a given interpretation invalid? Any given participant's interpretation would only be considered invalid if it appeared to inaccurately describe the participant's *own* experience. In other words, the validity of a reported interpretation would be considered weak if the report was poorly articulated, for example, or reported in a vague or ambiguous manner.

In summary, then, we are able to determine both the general structure of the phenomenon and the validity and reliability of that structure, through an analysis of the variations of reported meaning. As Wertz (1986) states "The criterion of qualitative reliability is therefore *persistence of meaning through the factual variations*" (p.200).

Now that I have covered some of the philosophy that underlies the phenomenological method, I would like to turn to the specific procedures that were employed in the present study.

Chapter Four

Methodology

In this chapter I discuss the actual phenomenological procedures that were used in the study and provide an explanation concerning how the results were analyzed. Also included in this chapter is a presentation of the process of bracketing that I, as a researcher, underwent prior to interviewing the participants for the study.

An Experiential Method

Before I move on to the methodology "proper," I would like to say a few words about another method which has been utilized in the present study in an effort to reveal to the reader the experience of spirituality. One of the ways in which we become familiar or get a "sense" of the spiritual experience is by hearing the first-hand accounts in their natural or verbatim state. The words that describe the experience may "set off" the experience in ourselves. It is as if we can relate to the experience as something vaguely familiar or somehow forgotten. To provide this empathic level of recognition I provided some examples of reported spiritual experience in the first two chapters. The results section which follows this chapter also provides numerous quotes taken directly from the participants' transcripts. I believe that this presentation of spiritual experience will potentially provide readers with an immediate experiential component in their reading of the study.

Participant Selection

Qualitative research methods use an approach to sampling that is called "purposeful." Unlike quantitative probability sampling, the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. According to Patton (1990), "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research." (p.169)

The criterion for being selected to be interviewed for the study was simply a declaration by the prospective participants that they had had an experience which *they* would describe as a spiritual experience. However, I did limit the selection of participants to individuals who reported spontaneously occurring experiences. Therefore, drug induced or altered state experiences that were intentionally initiated through specific procedures such as holotropic breathing, fasting, or esoteric meditative practices, were not included in the study. Neither did I chose participants who reported near-death experiences.

The participants were identified primarily by word of mouth, that is, I asked people whom I knew if they might know someone who could describe having had a spiritual experience. A participant's recorded data was considered "information-rich" if he or she articulately described one or more spiritual experiences. The only limitation on what may be identified as a spiritual experience is contained in the general interpretation provided earlier. The general interpretation provided earlier states: A spiritual experience may be conceptualized as an unusual state of awareness, characterized by the individual's report of an altered perception of the world and/or a sense of being conscious of a non-physical force or power. The phrase "perception of the world" includes perception of self.

I had decided prior to interviewing participants that between five and ten people would be included in the study. This number would be determined when the information that was being gathered adequately depicted the "*structure*" of spiritual experience. As described in the previous chapter the structure of an experienced phenomenon is viewed as an exposition of the "clustering" of meaning around a general theme(Stapleton, 1983). My use of the term structure does not refer to the *essence* of the reported experience.

Altogether, I interviewed eleven people for the study but had to discard five of the interviews as not being examples of information-rich cases of the phenomenon under study. The five interviewees whose transcripts were not included in the study were excluded on the basis of one, or both, of the following factors;

1) Their reports of spiritual experience were difficult to comprehend, either being vague, tangential, or lacking in specificity and detail.

2) Their reports did not "fit" the general interpretation, which was used as a limitation on what would be considered a "spiritual experience" for the study.

Some of the excluded interviews were descriptions of paranormal events such as mindreading or psychokinesis. One was a report of a near-death experience, which I decided I would not include because the interviewee was unconscious at the time of the experience. This is an arbitrary decision based on my belief that near-death experiences are a qualitatively different experience than the kind of spiritual experience I was interested in studying. A couple of the interviews were not included because the interviewee could not describe a *particular* spiritual experience, but instead provided more abstract reports of how their whole life was seen as a spiritual experience.

The Sample

Initially I had planned to seek out informants who might represent "varied" spiritual backgrounds. For instance, I was hoping to find one informant who might identify herself as Catholic, one as Buddhist, and another who would be chosen on the basis of not being associated with any organized religious denomination. However, I was unable to find a willing participant who had a background that was other than Christian. All of the six participants had been exposed, to a greater or lesser degree, to the Christian religious tradition, although only two of them were presently attending traditional church services on a regular basis.

Five of the participants were female and one was male. The ages of the participants were as follows; 31, 40, 52, 53, 60, and 60. All of the participants were university educated. More detailed information about the participants is provided in the results chapter that follows.

It would have been interesting, and may have added to the study, if I had been able to interview participants who were from a religious tradition other then Christianity. Their reports of spiritual experience may have revealed different imagery and perhaps even some additional themes would have been identified. However, limiting the sample to a homogeneous selection in no way invalidates the meaningfulness of the reported experiences. For instance, if I had been studying the experience of anger, it would not be *necessary* to have participants from different ethnic or religious backgrounds to provide

useful results. Having a heterogeneous sample may have added to the richness of the study, but it was not a necessity.

Data Collection - Interviewing the Participants

Once an individual was identified as someone who was willing to share his or her report of a spiritual experience, I set up an interview time. Five of the six selected interviews were carried out in the participants' homes, while the sixth was carried out at the participant's place of business. The interviews were semi-structured and were limited to a two-hour session of face-to-face contact. All of the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim to computer disc. The interviewing process was preceded by the signing of a consent form (see appendix C) and a standardized "Interview Introduction" (see appendix B). The "Interview Introduction" was used to ensure that each of the participants started the interview with the same general understanding of the purpose and focus of the interview.

The participants were asked standardized preliminary questions to initiate the description of their spiritual experience(s)., These questions are presented in appendix A. Once the participants began describing their spiritual experience, I prompted them for more specific details related to the "immediate" level of the experience. The immediate or pre-reflective level of the experience refers to what the participants felt, heard, saw or intuited at the actual time of the experience, as opposed to their retrospective or reflective interpretation of the meaning of the experience. However, the last part of the interview was used to solicit reports of how the reported experiences informed or influenced the

participant's day-to-day life and worldview. This part of the interview focused on the reflective and behavioral level of the overall experience.

Approximately the first ten minutes of the interview were used to obtain a personal history of the interviewee. This personal information was collected to provide a context in which to interpret the reported experiences. Notes were taken by myself after the interview process and throughout the study. These notes consisted primarily of hypotheses about the phenomenon and the research process.

Data Analysis

As has been stated earlier, the purpose of the present study was to examine the immediate or pre-reflective level of the reported spiritual experiences. I was interested in what the participants felt, saw, heard and intuited at the actual time that the reported spiritual experience occurred. In order to accomplish this goal I was motivated to choose a phenomenological methodology which remains as close to immediate experience as possible. The procedural phenomenological method that I chose to utilize is that which is outlined by Giorgi (1985), with some additional procedures adopted from the method proposed by Osborne (1990) . This choice may seem to be inconsistent with my earlier stated bias, discussed in the previous chapter, of being more in agreement with the interpretive phenomenological perspective rather then Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology. However, I am in agreement with Giorgi on the issue of the value of analyzing the immediate, pre-reflective level of experience and I believe that his method of analyzing data is the most effective for this purpose. Giorgi's procedural method is both

simple and rigorous. My only disagreements with Giorgi are related to the issues of whether his "descriptions" of experience would be more accurately termed "interpretations" of experience and whether or not the formulated structure of an experience reveals the universal essence of the experience. For the above stated reasons, I utilized Giorgi's general procedural method and changed some of the wording so that the method would be more in line with the interpretive perspective. I also found that once I had my results I had to alter Giorgi's analysis procedure in order to fully address the unique results that the participant's provided. This issue is discussed further below and also in both the Results and Discussion Chapters.

Giorgi's four step method is outlined below:

(1) Sense of the Whole : The interview data are read through entirely to get a sense of the entire reported experience(s).

(2) Discrimination of Meaning Units : The interview data are re-read and "meaning units" are identified from within a psychological perspective and with a focus on the phenomenon being researched.

(3) Transforming the Meaning Units Into Themes : The meaning units are transformed and categorized (thematized) so that the psychological insight contained in them is expressed more directly.

(4) Synthesis Into the Structure of Experience: Finally, the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject's experience. (adapted from Giorgi, 1985, p.10)

It is interesting to note that even in this basic outline of Giorgi's (1985) method it seems evident to me that an *interpretation* of experience is being formulated rather than a description of experience. In step number two above, Giorgi acknowledges that meaning units are identified from a psychological perspective. Surely a psychological perspective is a particular *interpretation* of reported experience, no? Nevertheless, Giorgi's (1985) phenomenological method provides us with an approach to analysis that keeps the researcher close to the presented data. The issue of "fidelity to the phenomena" (Collaizi, 1978) can be easily assessed by the reader as the researcher's interpretation of the participant's experience is displayed opposite the reported experience itself. (see Results - Chapter Five.)

Format of Analysis

Themes vs. Different Kinds of Experience

Once all of the interviews were completed and the data were broken down into meaning units and thematized, I realized that the results had revealed some qualities of spiritual experience that I had not predicted prior to the interviewing. Initially, I had assumed that studying and analyzing spiritual experience would be similar to studying and analyzing other experiences such as that of anger or depression. However, when I first began to analyze the participants' interviews it became evident to me that instead of *one kind* of spiritual experience, with various related themes, the participants seemed to be reporting a number of qualitatively *different kinds* of experiences all under the heading of

"spiritual experience." This result required that I alter the formatting of the analysis to incorporate this unexpected finding.

Let me discuss this important issue in a little more depth. If we take, for example, the analysis of the experience of anger, we would find that there are a number of ways that anger is experienced. In other words, there are variations in the reported experience of anger. Participants describing their experience of anger might report feeling frustrated, hurt and full of energy. These descriptions would become the themes that make up the *structure* of the experience of anger. However, with the reported spiritual experiences some of the "ways" in which participants described their experience were significantly different, one from another, to conclude that the descriptions were of qualitatively different experiences. In other words, rather than there being *a* spiritual experience it appears that there are a number of spiritual *experiences*. Therefore, to represent the descriptions as simply different themes under a single heading, spiritual experience, would not have adequately captured the diversity of the experiences reported under the heading "spiritual."

Let me provide an example from the results to further clarify this issue. One of the commonly reported descriptions of spiritual experience involved the report of an overwhelming feeling of love that seemed to envelope the participants and nourish them. Another, somewhat less commonly reported description, involved experiencing a vision or trance that resulted in the participant perceiving what appeared to be an "other worldly" being. It is my impression that these two descriptions are of qualitatively different experiences and, therefore, we cannot proceed under the assumption that they are different

themes of *one* general type of spiritual experience. Instead I have proceeded under the assumption that there are numerous kinds of spiritual experience.

So, instead of conceptualizing various *themes* under the one heading, "spiritual experience," I came to the conclusion that there were a number of qualitatively different *experiences* under the umbrella term "spiritual experiences." The best analogy that I can apply to the situation is that of the term "emotions" in relation to the experience of sadness, fear, joy, etc.. The terms "emotional experiences" and "spiritual experiences" are analogous in the sense that they signify a broad category of experiences. In my opinion, it would not be as useful to try and formulate the structure of the experience of "emotion," as it would be to formulate the structure of the experience of "sadness," for example. In this regard, then, I decided to identify and analyze the *various* experiences that the participants reported under the heading of "spiritual experience."

Levels of Hierarchical Analysis

The process of analyzing the data was carried out in levels. The data was essentially broken down into meaning units and then built up again into generalized *interpretations*[•] of the identified states of awareness. Finally, the generalized interpretations were synthesized and an overall statement was made about spiritual experience.

[•] Please note that I decided to use the term "generalized interpretations" instead of "generalized descriptions" so as to underline the interpretive nature of the analysis. This choice of words is made simply to emphasize the distinction between the interpretive and descriptive approaches to phenomenology.

The first level of analysis required breaking down the participants' reports of spiritual experience, the data, into meaning units. In the present study the criterion for being identified as a meaning unit was that the selected data provided an example of the immediate or pre-reflective level of a reported "unusual state of awareness." In other words, the selection of meaning units was limited to the *immediate experience* of reports of unusual states of awareness. As stated in the introduction , an unusual state of awareness may be characterized by an individual's report of an alternate perception of the world and/or a sense of being conscious of a non-physical force or power. The phrase "perception of the world" includes perception of self.

In the second level of analysis I interpreted and labeled the meaning units as examples of different spiritual experiences, (as opposed to different themes under the heading of one "spiritual" experience). Since the various experiences that the participants were reporting were all examples of "unusual states of awareness," I decided to use the term "states of awareness" when referring to the experiences. Ten different "states of awareness" were identified as follows: Beauty/Awe, Harmony, Light, Connectedness, Love, Presence of Other, Energy, Guiding Intuition, Expanded Consciousness, and Vision/Trance. In this second level of analysis the meaning units that were selected from the text are laid out next to a column labeled "Interpretation." (see Chapter Five - Results) I have used the term "interpretation," instead of "paraphrase," to make it clear that my re-wording of the text is inescapably an interpretation, as opposed to a description of the reported experience. In this column I have attempted to re-word the report of spiritual

experience in straightforward language that focuses on the immediate or pre-reflective level of the reported experience. The third column provides a "state of awareness" label for each of the interpreted meaning units.

In the third level of analysis the quotes and interpretations associated with each of the identified "states of awareness" were developed into a generalized interpretation. In other words, the participants' various quotes, and my interpretation of those quotes, were examined as a "whole" and a generalized interpretation of that state of awareness was then formulated. I decided to retain many of the quotes themselves in the generalized interpretation as a means of capturing the richness of expression provided by the participants original reports. It is important to note that the generalized interpretations were formulated by combining both the commonly reported interpretations of each state and the less commonly reported interpretations into an overall, or general, interpretation of each state.

Let me expand on this issue of common interpretations. As I discussed in the previous chapter, I lean in the direction of supporting the perspective offered by the school of interpretive phenomenology, as opposed to descriptive phenomenology. The interpretive phenomenologist is interested in both characteristic and uncharacteristic reports of experience. Therefore, the generalized interpretations of the participants spiritual experiences that I formulated include interpretations of both the common, or characteristic reports of spiritual experience, and the less common, or uncharacteristic reports.

The generalized interpretations offer a *general statement* that attempts to capture the overall quality, or structure, of each of the reported states of awareness. My use of the term generalized interpretation is analogous to the use of the term "general structure," as used by proponents of descriptive phenomenology. However, I am not suggesting that the generalized interpretation describes the universal essence of the phenomenon. What I am suggesting is that the generalized interpretation provides a picture of a *common ground* associated with the phenomenon. The common ground is reflected in the "clustering" of meaning around a general theme. Instead of there being "variations of identical meaning" around a general theme, as suggested by Giorgi (1992), I would argue that there are "variations of related meaning" around a general theme.

In my opinion, these generalized interpretations provide the most interesting and useful results that the study has to offer. The generalized interpretations of each of the states of awareness reveal remarkably consistent and common themes *within* each identified state. These generalized interpretations are presented on p.130 of the Results Chapter.

The analysis takes an interesting turn at this point. Since I had concluded that the reports of spiritual experience revealed *numerous* experiences rather then variations of one general experience, I initially assumed that I would not attempt a synthesis of these experiences, the states of awareness, into an *overall* description, or synthesis of the *general structure* of spiritual experience. It seemed to me that attempting a general structure for spiritual experience would be like attempting one for "emotion," where the result would likely be a broad, but sparse, "sketch" that would only include the common

elements of the various experiences that are grouped under the general term. However, information provided by one of the participants combined with the theoretical background provided by Wilber (1977) on unitive consciousness convinced me that a synthesis of the various "states" might provide us with a glimpse of the experience of unitive consciousness* itself. Wilber describes unitive consciousness as an ultimate expanded state of consciousness which includes all levels of the more contracted states of consciousness. The synthesis, then, is a speculative, and therefore conceptual, description of unitive consciousness that was created by combining the actual phenomenological descriptions of each of the ten states of awareness described by the participants. This issue is addressed fully in the Discussion chapter.

As an added measure of reliability I had another researcher examine my analysis of the various themes, or states of awareness, to determine if his analysis would derive similar conclusions from the data. Although we agreed that the labels for the various states could be assigned alternate names, the independent researcher was generally in agreement with my analysis. This step in the procedure has been described as a "decision trail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Presuppositions of the Researcher: Bracketing

The following information was written before I gathered the data and is presented so that the reader may have an understanding of the particular perspective from which I approached the reports of spiritual experience provided by the participants. I have written this information in the form of a story, or narrative, in order that the reader might "read

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* Unitive consciousness as described by Wilber (1977; 1979).

between the lines" to achieve an understanding of my particular bias on the subject. Although I have retained the use of the phenomenological term "bracketing," I do not mean to infer, in the Husserlian sense, that somehow I could get beyond my own personal perspective on the subject in question. However, setting aside my pre-suppositions, in as much as that is possible, is certainly a helpful exercise that allows both the reader and myself to ascertain my personal and unique perspective of the phenomenon.

"I was brought up in a large Catholic family and attended church on a weekly basis until I was approximately twelve years of age. After the age of twelve and until I turned thirty years old in 1988, I was of the opinion that the church, and the institution of religion in general, were essentially agents of social control that provided the masses with a "ready-made" world-view. In the case of Christianity, this world-view seemed oppressive and repressive to me and generally lacking in imagination. It was my opinion that the story of Jesus, God, Heaven and Hell had historically acted simply, and relatively effectively, at lessening the existential anxiety associated with being human.

During the years mentioned above, the meaning of the term "spirituality" was, for me, a reference to an individual's belief in the "fabricated" story of a particular religion, be it Christianity or otherwise. I suppose, in some sense, science had become my "religion," in that I believed science would eventually provide us with some overall understanding of the cosmos and our place in it.

At about the age of thirty I had a few experiences that led me to believe that a person's spirituality was more than simply a belief in a story or a philosophy of meaning. These "experiences" were certainly not on the order of "cosmic consciousness" as

described by Bucke (1969), but might be classified as, using Maslow's (1971) term, peak experiences. In my own words, I would say that the experiences were characterized by the following themes: a brief, intuitive sense that there is an overall purpose to the Universe and a "felt awareness," or knowing, that "everything" is connected and is in some kind of harmony. Associated with this cognitive "awareness" was a feeling of joy and satisfaction at being part of something both meaningful and purposeful.

My pre-suppositions concerning the reports of spiritual experience include the following;

1) Participants will likely describe brief, "altered states" that have some common themes amongst them.

2) These "altered states" may occur primarily in outdoor settings and will often be experienced as satisfying, "peak" experiences.

3) The participants may "translate" their experiences into religious terms and symbols based on their religious affiliation.

4) The experiences will contribute to the participants' interest and involvement in a "spiritual life."

Finally, I believe there is a distinct difference between one's spirituality and one's religion. It seems to me that at the core of all the religions is the "transcendent spiritual experience" which is then translated into the "language" and structure of that particular religious following or sect. In this regard, organized religion can be seen as an effort to communicate the "knowledge" gained from transcendent experiences.

Ethical Considerations

A proposal for the present study was submitted for approval to the Department of Educational Psychology Research and Ethics Committee at the University of Alberta. The committee approved the proposal without changes on May 3, 1994. See appendix "C" for a copy of the consent form used in the study.

Chapter Five

RESULTS

In this chapter an analysis of the participants' transcribed interviews is presented along with generalized interpretations of ten states of awareness that were identified as being characteristic of the participants' descriptions of spiritual experience. In addition, as was described earlier in chapter four, a synthesis of the ten states of awareness is presented that may provide us with a conceptual "picture" of "unity consciousness."

In the first section below a brief biographical description of each of the participants is provided, followed by his or her analyzed transcripts. The biographical information is presented with the data so that the reader may place the presented data in the personal context of the individual participant.

Following the biographical information provided below is the analysis of the interviews. In some cases it may be difficult for you, as the reader, to determine how I made a connection between the participants' original statements and the interpretation I attributed to the statements. This confusion may be due to the fact that the meaning units presented on the following pages are taken out of context from the full transcript. For this reason the "state of awareness" label attached to a particular meaning unit may seem incongruent with the text itself. This situation occurs because the text may be referring to an experience that was labeled earlier in the transcript.

To provide an example of the above situation I will refer to some of the actual text from the analysis that follows. One of the participants described feeling intensely connected or part of his surroundings. I labeled this state of awareness as

"interconnectedness." Later in the transcript the same participant described how this experience of "interconnectedness" left him with an altered perception of himself. Instead of identifying a distinct "state of awareness" category labeled "altered perception of self" this description is included under the "interconnectedness" label. However, for you as the reader it may be difficult to determine how the "state of awareness" label was identified with each particular meaning unit because you do not have the advantage of seeing the entire transcript. In addition, occasionally the interpretation also reflects the participant's non-verbal responses, where participants may, for example, indicate a sense of awe with the tone of their voice. For the above reasons you may encounter some difficulty in following the rationale for my identification of labels for the various meaning units. Unfortunately the only solution to this problem would have been to include the entire transcript of the recorded interview. Since that would have added another 150 pages to the dissertation we will have to settle for the incomplete presentation of the transcript that follows.

Participant #1: Jan

The first participant, whom I will call Jan, is a sixty-year-old married women who has three of her own children and three adopted children. Jan was brought up Christian and has been active in the church most of her life. Her husband is a minister of the United Church and Jan has served the church in various roles over the years. Jan is a writer and has also taught creative writing. One of the courses she teaches focuses on writing your spiritual autobiography.

Jan reported four different descriptions of spiritual experiences that she has had over the years and provided examples of nine of the ten identified states of awareness. Jan's descriptions of her spiritual experiences reveal her close ties to organized religion in that they include numerous references to Christian and biblical concepts and ideas. Her first reported experience occurred when she was sixteen years old and took place in a chapel. Jan described seeing a beautiful light that enveloped her and left her feeling more fully integrated. She experienced a "presence" that was associated with the perception of the light. In her second reported experience, Jan described taking part in an exercise of "speaking in tongues" that seemed to put her in a trance and led to an energizing "out of body" experience. She described this experience as being similar to the ecstasy of sexual experience.

Jan's third reported experience is a description of entering a trance while she was rehearsing a play and feeling as if she could perceive the world through the eyes and ears of someone else. She noted that giving up personal control seemed to act as a catalyst for the trance state. In her fourth, and final, reported experience Jan recounted being "guided" by an inner voice that provided her with the inspiration to write a play.

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 1		
Experience # 1.1: Chapel Light		
1. Well, that it was a presence of holiness... the air felt warmer and like there was a comfort... There was, like I was not alone in that room. There was another presence...	Presence of another is described as "holiness" and as being comforting.	**Presence of other.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
2. And I looked up and the corner of the room where the altar was, was full of light.	Perceives an intense light surrounding the altar.	**Light.**
3. There was another presence there and it was becoming, it had stopped being completely around me but it moved into one space.	Presence of "other" is experienced as having a location in the room.	**Presence of other.**
4. It was like I was in a bubble, and yet it wasn't a bubble that was choking me. I was expanding and becoming part of it.	Describes an experience of sensing she was becoming part of the light, being enveloped by the light.	**Light.** **Connectedness.**
5. Well, it's, well I guess the closest thing I can draw it to is the same sense one gets through sexual ecstasy. This was an ecstatic moment.	Feeling one with the light is described as an ecstatic experience similar to sexual ecstasy.	**Light.** **Connectedness.**
6. ...where you feel like the fireworks have gone off in your head, and full of energy, just like you're touching an energy field.	Describes experiencing energy from being in touch with an energy field.	**Energy.**
7. Yeah, being completely integrated, being completely, instead of shattered and being so fragmented as I felt in my school life, home life, uh, social life.	Describes experiencing a sense of herself as fully integrated.	**Harmony.**
8. I think it must have been moments, but they were, but they are branded on my psyche, just branded.	Experience of being one with the light lasts only moments.	**Light.** **Connectedness**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
9. ...there was feelings of relief... and joy	Experience of the perception of light and the presence of another brings a sense of relief and joy.	**Light.** **Presence of other.**
Experience # 1.2: Speaking in Tongues 10. ...but for those few moments when I realized that if you gave up control of the rational verbal and said, I love you God, without linguistic control, that it was quite ecstatic (with emphasis).	Letting go of rational control leads to an ecstatic, energizing experience.	**Energy.**
11. I felt something like that, out of body and in body at the same time. Being separated from myself, looking at myself...	Experience a sense of being separated from her self, out of her body and yet in her body at the same time.	**Expanded consciousness.**
12. Well kind of that of being totally there but also able to watch.	Describes an experience of watching herself and being conscious of herself at the same time.	**Expanded consciousness.**
13. ...and then afterwards I went out and the grass looked greener, it sharpened everything. Sharpened perception, so you feel as if the edges of things are much clearer, and the depth perception feels much better.	Visual perception heightened, the environment is perceived as clearer and depth perception improves.	**Beauty\awe.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience # 1.3: Acting in Trance 14. And I went back into the hall where we were putting it on, and it was like I was possessed. I felt a sense of this is not me, this is verily not me. (pause) And I don't remember doing it, it was like I did it in a trance,	Describes giving up control of herself and going into a trance where she felt life someone else.	**Vision/Trance.**
15. So it's, it was like the experience I have, sometimes, I realize now that as I, a spiritual kind of person, that when I want to do something, and do a good job, I give the control away... I give control over.	Giving up control leads to an experience of trance and results in a creative, spiritual experience.	**Vision/Trance.**
16. **I.** And you felt like you kind of went into a trance. What does that feel like. **P.** That I was not there. That I was somebody else, I was a dusty, dirty beggar, and I could practically smell the sweat on my skin and it was a different smell.	Trance described as an experience of being somebody else, experienced even at a bodily/sensory level.	**Vision/Trance.**
Experience # 1.4: Guided Play 17. And all of a sudden I had this vision in my head and I said, wow, I got to get this. And I went away and I sat down at my computer, and it was like I was taking notes.	Description of creative thoughts and images being given to her.	**Guiding Intuition.**
18. ...you feel like you've been possessed, that you've gotten, that you're hooked up in your head back to another, and another and another. That you're linked up, not just integrated to yourself but connected all the way back.	Guiding intuition is described as feeling possessed and connected to others, or ancestors, from the past.	**Guiding Intuition.**

Participant # 2: Susan

The second participant, whom I will call Susan, was born in Holland and moved to Canada when she was eight years of age. She is fifty two years old now and is divorced with three adopted children. Susan's two oldest children have left home and the youngest is at home with her. Presently, Susan is completing a Ph.D. in psychology and she views herself as an "extremely spiritual person." Susan made it clear, however, that she makes a strong distinction between her spirituality and her experience with organized religion. Susan grew up in a large family being the fourth oldest in a family of seven children. She described her family as "strictly" religious. They were members of the Christian Reformed church and she remembers that up until the age of about twenty-two she attended church *twice* every Sunday.

Susan reported that she generally considered the fundamentalist doctrine that she was exposed to as a child as "hogwash" and as intimidating. Intimidating both in the sense of the punishments that could be doled out by an all powerful God, eternal damnation, etc., and the social pressure applied by the church and community to adopt the fundamentalist beliefs. She also stated that the doctrine was very "guilt inducing."

At the present time Susan attends an Anglican church but states that she primarily attends to enjoy the ritual, the time and space for contemplation, and the belongingness and satisfaction at being part of a community. Susan related that her strong sense of spirituality comes not from her experiences with the church but through her personal spiritual experiences which she described in the research interview.

Susan only described two spiritual experiences but provided some interesting and detailed information about these experiences. She provided examples of five of the ten identified states of awareness. Her first reported experience involved an intense awareness of the loving presence of her mother after her mother had passed on. This awareness was described as a profound experience that left a lasting and significant impression on her. Her second reported experience took place in a cathedral and consisted of experiencing an overwhelming feeling of love centered in her chest that was "almost too much to bear." The love is described as radiating from her chest and as feeling so powerful that it became painful.

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 2 ***Experience # 2.1-*** Loss of Parent 1. And, and it was like that essence, the essence of my mother was somehow inside of me here. In some way we were merged. Like she was in me, that's the only way I was able to put it or to describe it to myself.	Describes an awareness of her mother's presence, her essence, as being inside or merged with her.	**Presence of other.**
2. ...like my shell was around her spirit, or her essence, or whatever, it was that she had stood for. And it was like it was refined, like all the sort of daily fallibilities and so on were gone and that sense of my mother, it was pure and it was loving, refined, cleansed,...	Describes feeling loved by the presence of her mother and perceiving the beauty of the refined essence of her mother.	**Presence of other.** **Love.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
3. I would say, from about my waist up to here,... it was like this mass of something,... it felt, I suppose there was a sense of heat, if there was any sort of a sensory thing with it, it was a sense of heat.	Presence of her mother experienced within her from her waist to her neck as a sense of heat or warmth.	**Presence of other.**
4. Uhm, peace, there was a strong, a very powerful sense of peace, communion, very , very powerful sense of communion. It was like, yeah, it was like my mother and I were communing.	Connecting with the spirit or essence of her mother described as communing.	**Connectedness** **Presence of other.**
5. Connecting, in some way...it was meshed, it really was merged, there was a real sense of one-ness there.	Describes feeling connected to her late mother and being one with her.	**Connectedness**
6. ...it was buoyant, there was a sense of buoyancy. It wasn't joyous, but it was, but there was buoyancy and a peacefulness and a serenity and an "It's okay."	Describes an experience of acceptance and peacefulness related to the loss of her mother.	**Harmony.**
7. Yeah, the words that I put to it as I was experiencing it was love, I experienced it as my mother's love.	Describes a powerful experience of being loved by the spirit or essence of her mother.	**Love.**
8. But I guess, when I had that really, really, really powerful sense of my mother inside me, and this was an hour and a half or two hours after she had died, in some way she was still there.	Describes the experience of sensing her mother inside of her as a distinct presence .	**Presence of other.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
9. And I had a really powerful sense of, there is something beyond, without having any way of saying what the beyond was at all.	Describes feeling connected and intuitively aware of something beyond her day to day reality.	**Presence of other.** **Connectedness.**
Experience # 2.2 - Contemplation in Church 10. ...it would be just very centered around the heart, And it was like this molten something, that was so intense it was almost impossible to bear. And it was very joyous, and loving,...	Describes an intense, joyous experience of love centered in her chest.	**Love.**
11. And it was very joyous, and loving, I suppose in a way, but it was so joyous that it was painful.	Experience of intense love described as painful.	**Love.**
12. Grateful. It was grateful, it was enormously, enormously, just thankful.	Describes an overwhelming feeling of gratitude associated with feeling loved.	**Love.**
13. It was warm, it was very warm, it was like molten gold, it was smooth, it was shiny, it radiated, it radiated, it was, and it was overwhelming.	Describes a radiating, warm feeling in her chest that is referred to as love.	**Love.**
14. Hurt like, I can't support this.	The pain experienced with love is described as overwhelming.	**Love.**
15. ...this sense of I've got to hang on to this, I've got to hang on to this, I've gotta hang on to this,... yes, I don't want this to go away, ever.	Describes wanting to desperately retain the feeling of love.	**Love.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
16. But yet quite impersonal, there was no person associated with it. I felt, I felt loving, I felt like I wanted to embrace the world, I wanted to embrace everything.	Describes loving feeling as being impersonal, as love for the whole world.	**Love.**
17. ...it was (pause) it was like a meltdown... I felt loving...[I. So you felt your love going outwards ?] Yes.	Love is experienced as melting within her and being projected out to the world.	**Love.**
18. It just all seemed so incredible. Sitting, sitting in the cathedral with the, with the light, the play of light that came in...	Describes a feeling of awe and an awareness of the beauty of her surroundings.	**Beauty/awe.**

Participant # 3: John

The third participant, whom I will call John, is a thirty-one-year-old married man from Edmonton who has three children. John grew up the third oldest in a family of four children. He describes himself as being "raised definitely a Catholic" with parents who were committed to the faith but not fanatically so. John reported that his exposure to the Catholic religion was for the most part positive and he became active in the church during his high school years. One summer he attended a Catholic camp and apparently had a spiritual experience there, which he described in the interview.

John reported that from his teen years onwards he has had a keen interest in religious studies and he has just recently completed a Masters degree in theology. His religious studies have focused on comparative religion and he describes his own views as

being "grounded" in the Western tradition, although he has also examined the Eastern tradition. John stated that his interest in religious studies has led him to become actively involved in community and social and political action. He describes his spirituality as being tied in with social and political awareness. John is uncertain about what area he will work in now that he has finished his degree, although he is certain that his work will be in an area that provides some social contribution. In addition to his religious and social involvement, John is a professional musician.

John reported four spiritual experiences and provided six examples of the ten identified states of awareness. John's first reported spiritual experience occurred when he was nine years old and took place while he was alone in the woods following a thunderstorm. The experience involved an awareness of being intensely connected to his natural surroundings and sensing the presence of "something" that was "comforting and relaxing." In addition to the comforting presence there was also a certain amount of fear related to feeling connected to the "immenseness" of his surroundings. John's second reported experience took place at a religious summer camp when he was fifteen years old. He had spent the evening discussing religious themes and had attended a mass, after which he described feeling he was being "surrounded" by a white light that was experienced as a "loving God." He felt cleansed by the white light and was left with a feeling of self-acceptance. The third reported experience occurred while John was on a trek through the Himalayas. John described that, while gazing at the stars after a long day of hiking, he felt an intense appreciation for the beauty of the universe and a profound awareness that all is "right" with the universe. The fourth experience reported by John took place after he had

heard a speech by the Dalai Lama in Asia. After the speech he had returned alone to his hotel room. He had been doing some body movement exercises and was sitting and contemplating his journey through Asia. The experience lasted for only a few minutes and involved feeling deeply loved and accepting of himself and wanting to return that love to others.

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 3 ***Experience # 3.1-*** **Child in the Woods** 1. ...and so I was all alone, as a fairly young child, I guess nine years old, and I remember all of a sudden just stopping and hearing the incredible silence. It was just a frightening experience in many respects.	Describes an experience of being in awe of the silence and of feeling some associated fear .	**Beauty\Awe.**
2. But then I had this very vivid experience of the color of green,...	Perception is described as vivid and as a satisfying experience.	**Beauty\Awe.**
3. ...very overwhelming kind of sense of everything being alive around me...	Feeling connected to surroundings is experienced as the surroundings being "alive."	**Connectedness.**
4. ...and just stopping and stopping dead in my tracks and feeling, I don't know if the right word is watched, but just feeling very aware of something.	Describes feeling watched or aware of the presence of another.	**Presence of other.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
5. And, you know, feeling on the one had very comforted and feeling very relaxed and also just a little bit scared, because it was a very powerful moment,...	Experience of being comforted and relaxed in the presence of "another."	**Presence of other.**
6. I felt all alone, very, very much alone, physically, from other people, yet just, it was the first I really remember having the sense of something much, much bigger than myself.	Describes being alone but feeling part of something larger than self.	**Connectedness.**
7. I.: So it was a kind of a thought, or a feeling..? P.: More of a feeling, definitely a feeling. It was kind of something that just sort of hung in the air for a while and then I moved on,...	Experience of being part of something beyond self described more as a feeling than a thought.	**Connectedness.**
8. But I was very, very stirred by it and very, it was like I had just woken up from a bit of a sleep, that's the best way I can describe that feeling.	Experience of being part of something beyond self described as like "waking up."	**Connectedness.**
9. Yeah, just kind of a heartbeat inside myself and inside of everything else.	Surroundings described as "alive" and part of self.	**Connectedness.**
10. I think that the intensity probably lasted for less than a minute. Uhm, but I think the feelings kind of lingered for a while as I sort of walked away.	Feeling of being part of the "living" surroundings lasts for less than a minute.	**Connectedness.**
11. ...it was almost a moment of kind of discovering sort of, as a child, becoming aware of the depth of myself. Finding an interior part of myself, my own interior garden or something like that.	Self is described as deeper in connection with surroundings.	**Connectedness.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
12. Yeah, it was a different sense of myself. And the only way I can describe it I think is as a kind of an opening downwards into myself would be the best metaphor to use.	Experience of connecting with surroundings associated with an altered perception of self.	**Connectedness.**
Experience #3.2 - Religious Camp 13. I guess joy is the best word to describe the emotion that I had never felt in my life, and at that time I mean, the language I would have used would definitely say, this is an experience of God, a God that loved me and cared about me, and was with me.	Joy is the emotion described as associated with being loved by God/light.	**Presence of other.** **Love.**
14. I remember honestly feeling and seeing this light, this white light that was surrounding me and in me, above me, below me, whatever and absolutely, I don't know, kind of cleansing my body.	The perception of light is accompanied by the experience of being "cleansed."	**Light.**
15. I can describe the color to you so therefore I did see it on some level, but I didn't see it outside of myself, I saw it inside of myself.	Light is experienced as being "seen" inside of self.	**Light.**
16. And I did experience it as a loving God. You know the other feeling that came with that was gratitude, I just remember feeling really grateful...	Feeling of gratitude associated with feeling loved by light/God.	**Love.** **Light.**
17. I have a visual impression, but I also have a strong feeling impression ...And it was just like a whole body experience, it wasn't my head and then my body, it was just sort of a whole experience.	Experience of light/love/God described as a holistic experience.	**Light.** **Love.** **Presence of other.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
18. More of it was like joy, that's the word I would use to describe the emotions.	Joy is experienced as part of being loved by light/God.	**Light.** **Love.** **Presence of other.**
19. There was definitely all of a sudden a kind of acceptance of self, a feeling I'm okay, and everything's okay, you don't have to worry. You know, just for that moment everything was okay...	Feeling loved is described as leading to an acceptance of self and the sense that everything is okay.	**Love.** **Harmony.**
Experience # 3.3 - In the Himalayas 20. It was beautiful, and it was just, it was like, it was kind of a sense of the universe, that's how it felt... and I had this real spontaneous feeling of gratitude, that's the word that's very clear... And it wasn't as though I was thanking anybody or anything per se, except that there was this flood of gratefulness that I could have this chance.	Describes an intense experience of perceiving the beauty of the surroundings and being flooded with a feeling of being grateful.	**Beauty/Awe.**
21. ...and there was a sense of, kind of almost like looking up at the universe and feeling for a moment that what a beautiful place this is, what a wonderful place this is, and not just where I was standing but just this universe is so incredible...	Experience of awe at perceiving the beauty of the universe.	**Beauty/Awe.**
22. Just a feeling that the universe, that underneath it all there was just the basic direction of the universe was right and was good.	Describes an experience of sensing that all was "right" with the universe.	**Harmony.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience # 3.4 - Hearing the Dalai Lama Speak 23. ...again I had this moment of a real strong faith, in my life, a strong faith in the world and in the universe, this sense that I really belonged, you know, I really belonged here, that life really mattered and that I could just trust that things would be okay.	Along with the feeling that all is okay is a sense of belonging and of purpose in the world.	**Harmony.**
24. Uhm, yeah, and again that I was okay. That seems to be a fairly common theme, too, that I felt very affirmed in who I was and what I was doing in my life,... that that was right.	Experience of being loved leads to an acceptance of self.	**Love.**
25. I guess the best word, if we used it carefully, would be love. Definitely a warmth towards other people. You know, kind of a feeling of having been loved and therefore that love wants to keep on loving somehow.	Describes that the experience of being loved is associated with a feeling of wanting to express love.	**Love.**

Participant # 4: **Sarah**

The fourth participant, whom I will call Sarah, is a fifty-three-year-old single women who was a nun for sixteen years and is presently a teacher of elementary school children. She has been teaching for thirty one years. Sarah has a B.A. and a B.Ed. and for a hobby she paints. Sarah is the youngest in a family of five children and grew up in

Alberta. At the present time she is closely involved with a program for adults who are baptized as they join the Catholic church.

Sarah described a total of four spiritual experiences and provided examples of seven of the ten states of awareness. The first experience she described took place while she was driving in a severe snow storm and involved a dramatic encounter with angels. This vision experience was accompanied by a very powerful feeling of peace and security and an intense awareness of being "loved." In her second reported experience Sarah described an awareness of her consciousness expanding and leaving her body. She reported that she felt herself leave her body and could "travel" and observe others from a perspective outside of her body. This experience is described as transforming and, again, as being accompanied by a powerful sensation of love.

Sarah's third reported spiritual experience took place when she was six years old. The experience occurred while she was fishing with her father and involved perceiving her natural surroundings as strikingly beautiful. The experience is described as a profound shift in how she usually viewed her surroundings and had an impact on her view of herself as well. Sarah's last reported experience is a description of going into a trance state and seeing a vision. She describes being in the woods alone and entering a trance state where she began to dance and had a vision of being surrounded by native women. This vision/trance state is accompanied by a feeling of being profoundly "connected" to her surroundings, connected in such a way that there seemed to be an absence of "boundaries" between herself and her surroundings.

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 4 **Experience # 4.1** : Angels 1. And I felt very peaceful, and I had, like it gets really difficult to describe, but I had a huge angel standing on my right front fender, and he was barefoot and very tall, and very blonde. He had sweeping robes on and he was sweeping, clearing my path.	Describes a vision of an angel accompanied by a peaceful feeling. The angel is described as physically acting by clearing her path.	**Vision/Trance.**
2. And then I became aware of a huge presence above me, that I understood was just a face and huge wings.	Presence of an angel is sensed and an awareness of physical attributes is experienced but not visually perceived.	**Presence of other.**
3. I heard beautiful music and there was a very powerful feeling of peace and that everything was going to be looked after and that I was fine.	Music is experienced with the vision and a powerful feeling that everything, including she herself, is fine.	**Vision/Trance.** **Harmony.**
4. **I.** So, actually, it was like a visual thing, or more of a sensing of the angels there? **P.** I can't distinguish the senses on this. It seems the presence was so real and so powerful for me and yet I knew I was conscious that I was driving the car.	Participant describes being unable to distinguish what senses were experiencing the vision, and yet, describes the experience as real and powerful.	**Vision/Trance.**
5. It was almost as though my senses, at times I've had that experience before, that my senses cross, that I'm able to see with my ears and hear with my eyes, and that sort of sense,	Vision is described as an experience her "senses cross" and it is like seeing with her ears and hearing with her eyes.	**Vision/Trance.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
6. **I.** So it's hard to distinguish whether you are actually seeing something, or feeling it, intuition, or another sense. **P.** ...or another level. Or there was another dimension that I was able to see that normally I'm not able to see. But I did have a very clear, clear picture of the presence on the right front fender.	Describes the difficulty of providing a sensory description of the vision experience but adds that the perception appeared clearly.	**Vision/Trance.**
7. ...and the one above me I did not see, but I knew there was a presence above me.	Presence of an angel is experienced but not perceived visually.	**Presence of other.**
8. I was really doubting what I was experiencing, and yet it was such a powerful experience, like my conscious mind, or my ego, I guess, my self, was saying, yeah sure, you know, there was a lot of doubt for me, but I know that I experienced this. It was very, very strong.	Describes feeling confused about the "reality" of the vision experience but emphasizes the powerful impact of the vision.	**Vision/Trance.**
9. Wonderful. Wonderful experience, like transcendent sorts of experiences. There was tremendous music and we sang,...	Vision is described as a wonderful experience where there is interaction with the angels in the vision.	**Vision/Trance.**
10. ...it was very comforting and very peaceful, and I was just really reassured that I was looked after... and I was just really loved and supported.	Vision experience is described as peaceful and comforting and a feeling of being loved is associated with the experience.	**Vision/Trance.** **Love.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
11. **I.** So, it's a hard thing to describe, but how would you describe that feeling of being loved? **P.** Well, it circled from the inside and it circled from the outside I guess, sort of really secure, and I just knew that there wasn't anything that was going to happen to me.	Feeling of love is described as coming in a circular way from both the inside and the outside. Love is experienced as being safe and secure.	**Love.**
12. It was a knowing, it was, that was the most interesting part about it, it was just a knowing that I, that this was perfectly safe.	Describes a "knowing" that everything is okay.	**Harmony.**
Experience # 4.2 : Playing with Dolphins. 13. ...and I felt myself leaving my body. I could feel myself sitting on the chair, but I felt myself leaving through my head, and I felt a real pressure around the crown of my head and I was really frightened, but part of me kept saying, this is really safe.	Describes a simultaneous awareness of being in her body and leaving her body. Pressure around the head is associated with the experience.	**Expanded consciousness.**
14. ...but I left my body, and I went around the room and I saw everyone's light within them. And then I left the room and I went over the ocean and played with the dolphins and whales for a while and then I went to the big light, and I did not want to leave.	Describes her consciousness leaving her body and moving through physical space without boundaries.	**Expanded consciousness.**
15. It was very, I think very transforming inside myself because I felt very secure again, and very peaceful, and sort of the all encompassing loving presence.	Describes an experience of an "all encompassing loving presence" associated with the out of body experience.	**Love.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
16. I guess it was my awareness, but I felt like it was part of me that was leaving through the top of my head. I could feel myself being pulled out, through the top of my head or pushing through this, like a circle around my head that I was pushing through a circle of something here, there was a very tight band around my head.	Moving out of the body is described as "being pulled out" or "pushed" through a circle at the top of the head.	**Expanded consciousness.**
17. Now whether or not it was my presence or my essence or my soul or whatever was leaving, I did experience what my body felt like, sitting on the chair when I was looking at the other people's lights... I could feel my bum on the chair but I also was seeing the other people's lights and I was above them in the room, sort of floating above them in the room.	Describes an experience of being in two locations at the same time.	**Expanded consciousness.** **Light.**
18. **I.** So it was like a sense of your consciousness or awareness was not in your body, it was above the room and you could perceive from there some way. Perceive the light. **P.** Their inner light, or their essence or their soul. Their being. And then I left, it was a very quick movement from them over the ocean where the dolphins and whales were playing, and then up to the big light. And when I approached the big light, there was a, almost like a magnetism, there was such a warmth or such a pull to stay with the big light.	Describes being able to view others "inner light" while her consciousness moved outside her body. Also, describes her consciousness being able to "move" about rapidly from place to place and being pulled to a "big light."	**Expanded consciousness.** **Light.**
19. I was very frightened, I didn't understand what was happening. I still don't really understand what was happening.	Experience of moving out of the body is described as frightening and confusing.	**Expanded consciousness.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
20. It's not like a dream state. It's very real,... And it was very, very tactile, very real. As though I were in my body.	Experience of consciousness outside the body is described as "very real", "tactile", and "as though I were in my body?"	**Expanded consciousness.**
Experience # 4.3 : Fishing 21. I began to see beauty, beauty within myself as well as outside of myself, and it was sort of like it belonged to me and it was all mine,...	Beauty is experienced within herself and in nature and is described as if her surroundings "belonged" to her.	**Beauty/Awe.**
22. **I.** How long did that experience last? **P.** Quite a long time. I think it was a very gradual sort of, kind of like an opening,	Experience of perceiving beauty is described as lasting a long time and being like a gradual opening.	**Beauty/Awe.**
23. It was almost perceiving it with different eyes. Like the eyes were mine, but the eyes weren't mine. Like they were larger eyes than mine that could see, could see the essence of the trees, and the lake and the mist and the water and the sky.	Experiences perceiving the "essence" of her surroundings through "larger" eyes .	**Beauty/Awe.**
24. **I.** And with it went what kinds of feelings? **P.** Oh, just sort of a bubbly, joyous, peaceful again, very peaceful experience,	Describes a peaceful, joyous experience in nature.	**Harmony.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience 4.4: Native Dance.		
25. and so I stood in the circle and just was really quiet there and closed my eyes and I began to hear drumming. My feet began to dance, sort of a native kind of dance, and I just allowed all this to happen, and I was, I felt I was surrounded by women and I was crying.	Describes having an experience where she heard music, began to dance and was surrounded by women.	**Vision/Trance.** **Presence of Other.**
26. ...I was in trance or something, and about an hour had passed. I'd looked at my clock just before I sat down and I'd been dancing in this circle for this time.	Describes the experience as a trance that lasted for about an hour.	**Vision/Trance.**
27. There was a oneness and I belonged there and that's what I experienced with the trees, it was like being in a very holy place and needing to whisper...	Describes feeling a oneness with the trees and feeling like she belonged there.	**Connectedness.**
28. it was like being in a very holy place and needing to whisper... great, very awesome sort of respect.	Describes an awesome respect for her surroundings.	**Beauty/Awe.**
29. Well, there didn't seem to be a separation between me or the tree or nature, like my boundaries weren't there. I could float into the tree and the tree could float into me, there didn't seem to be any barrier.	Describes an experience of feeling like there were no boundaries between herself and nature; "I could float into the tree and the tree could float into me?"	**Connectedness.**

Participant # 5: Mary

The fifth participant, whom I will call Mary, is a sixty-year-old married women with two children. Mary is an only child who describes her family as not being "particularly religious." Mary was exposed to religion, however, through her attendance at an Anglican girls' school from kindergarten to grade six. She reports that in her early years she spent a lot of time on her own and remembers feeling connected to what she described as an "angelic realm." Mary also stated that even as a young child she was intrigued by religious rituals and would act them out in her play.

In describing her personal history Mary reported that the painful and distressing experiences, such as the loss of her father and grandchild to illness and a number of other losses, were very much a part of her own spiritual growth. She believes that there have been many "coincidences" throughout her life that have guided her on a spiritual path.

Mary has participated in numerous personal and spiritual growth workshops over the years and is clearly committed to the spiritual dimension of her life. Through her experience with various seminars Mary became involved in an organization called New Thought Alliance and eventually organized a Centre of her own in Edmonton. At the present time Mary acts as the minister of a spiritual community. The Centre is a non-denominational meeting place for people who appreciate the support of a spiritual community and are interested in spiritual and personal growth.

Mary described seven different spiritual experiences and provided examples of seven of the ten identified states of awareness. Her first reported experience took place

while she was driving in a car and involved "receiving" an intuition that she experienced as guidance. Mary reported that this intuition, or inner voice, stood out from her usual thought processes and provided her with specific information. She stated that she has experienced this kind of guiding intuition on numerous occasions over the years. Mary's second reported experience involved a sensation of intense energy moving up her spine, leaving her feeling like she was "filled" with light. She stated that over the years she has come to believe that these experiences with energy are part of a spiritual awakening process which is described in the East Indian religion of Hinduism as a "kundalini awakening." Mary's third reported experience is also an example of experiencing an intense "rush" of energy in her body and on this particular occasion the energy was accompanied by an almost overwhelming feeling of ecstasy.

In Mary's fourth reported experience she describes feeling "loved" by light and having an experience where her consciousness seemed to expand so that she could perceive the room she was in even with her eyes closed. Her fifth reported experience also involved an expansion of consciousness, where Mary felt as if her "self" had expanded to become "one" with the universe. This expansion of self was accompanied by an insight that there was perfect harmony, meaning and beauty in the universe. Mary's sixth experience is a description of severe pain that she believes is associated with the energy that moves through her body. She reports that the energy can feel like having electricity run through your body and, at times, has left her with almost unbearable pain. In her last reported experience, Mary described that in the middle of giving a talk she let go of control and felt a rush of "loving energy."

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 5 **Experience # 5.1:** Guiding Intuition 1. ...as we're driving from there to Montana this voice is saying to me, Well, now you're going to get to see the other side of what it could be like. **I.** So when you say this voice, is it like an intuition? **P**. It's an intuition, it's not an audible voice.	Describes an experience of being guided by an intuitive thought.	**Guiding Intuition.**
2. It's the only way I know how to describe it, because it is, when I get this kind of intuition it's very specific, and it's different from my usual thought processes. Different enough that I pay attention to it.	Experience of intuitive thought provides specific information and is described as different from her usual thought processes.	**Guiding Intuition.**
3. **I**. So it's like a thought that doesn't seem, that stands out, that feels like maybe it's not part of your own usual thinking, or, like almost like, uh, your own thought but it feels like it's coming from the outside? **P**. No, it's inside myself, it's inside myself. It has a depth to it, and it usually has something specific, some specific information to give me. And I know I need to pay attention to it, although I don't always.	Intuitive guidance is experienced as coming from within and is described as having a depth to it.	**Guiding Intuition.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
5. **I**. Is it sometimes, I mean in that example, is it sometimes nerve racking or disturbing when you hear that? **P**. Oddly enough, no, it's actually perfectly peaceful. It's a knowing that I have, and I usually feel perfectly peaceful about it though I know that it maybe is at times announcing a traumatic event.	Intuitive guidance is experienced as a "knowing" and is described being accompanied by a "perfectly peaceful" feeling.	**Guiding Intuition.** **Harmony.**
Experience # 5.2 - Being the Light 6. ...and when he got up to start to talk I all of a sudden began to feel this sensation coming up my spine.	Energy is experienced as moving up the spine.	**Energy.**
7. And in this case it felt kind of strange, I didn't know what to do, and finally it just sort of threw me into a ramrod stiff position, like my arms were thrown up over my head, and my body just went stiff as a ramrod,...	The sensation of intense energy is described as leading to a stiffening of the body and the spine ..	**Energy**
8. ...and my body just went stiff as a ramrod, and I just filled up with light.	The infusion of energy is associated with an experience of being "filled" with light.	**Energy.** **Light.**
9. And I have no idea how long that was for, probably just a few seconds or minutes maybe...	Experience of intense energy lasts for a few seconds or minutes.	**Energy.**
10. It was like a rush of energy up my spine. And my body went just stiff. My arms were thrown up over my head, I mean, like it was moving me. I had no control over it. At least I felt like that.	Intense energy is experienced as moving the body and as being beyond her control.	**Energy.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
11. **P**. Because that's what it was, it was just like I was lit up like a Christmas tree inside. **I**. You could see light? **P**. I was filled with light, I don't know how to explain it.	Describes light as an inner experience of being "filled" with light.	**Light.**
12. **P.** Just like, like that's what I was, like I am light. **I.** So an experience of being light. **P.** Being light, yeah, I guess that's what you could call it.	Light is experienced as becoming one with the light, as "being" the light.	**Light.**
13. I mean, the light was, probably I was experiencing the light with all of my senses.	Describes experiencing the light with all of her senses.	**Light.**
14. And there was a voice there that said, it's all right, you're safe. Just lean back on me and I will support you, and it was like a feeling of being back against somebody or something and just being sort of held and supported there.	Describes an experience of sensing the presence of "somebody" and being held and supported.	**Presence of other.**
Experience # 5.3 : Dancing Goddess 15. ...and all of sudden this sensation starts coming up my spine again, only this time it was like real ecstasy, and it just came up just sort of an inch, an inch, inch at a time, until I was filled with ecstasy.	Energy is experienced as slowly moving up the spine and leading to an ecstatic feeling.	**Energy.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
16. And at that time again, the energy was moving me. And so I got up and stood up and I was actually standing on my feet and rocking back and forth like this, like a tree blowing in the wind, but with the roots still connected to the ground, and the energy just felt like it was just pouring through my finger tips, and it was really quite a remarkable experience.	Describes an experience of an overwhelming rush of energy that pours through her body and out through her fingertips.	**Energy.**
17. And it was like an ecstasy that crept up my spine right up to the top of my head.	Energy is experienced as moving up the spine and up to the top of her head.	**Energy**
Experience # 5.4: Seeing With Closed Eyes 18. ...it seemed like I and the room were filled with light, and I don't think I slept, I just sort of basked in this light all night long.	Light is experienced as filling the room and herself.	**Light.**
19. And even though I had my eyes closed I could see everything in the room in detail. If there had been a sign on the wall on the opposite side of the room I would have been able to read it,... are my eyes closed or are they open, ...I still don't have an explanation for how that could be except to say that I guess my consciousness isn't, maybe doesn't reside just in my body, you know.	Describes a detailed awareness of her surroundings even with her eyes closed.	**Expanded consciousness.**
20. ...and very loved, just felt love and love, just felt deeply loved and cradled in love, and very loving, very open, yeah.	Describes feeling deeply loved as light filled the room.	**Light.** **Love.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience # 5.5: Walking the Beach 21. I walking on the beach alone, and suddenly it felt like everything, everything in the universe was inside of me instead of me being in the universe.	Describes an experience of "becoming" the universe, of her consciousness expanding so that she was the universe.	**Expanded consciousness.**
22. At one point that got a little scary. I'm saying, hey, wait a minute, you know, if I get too big here I'm liable to disappear. And as soon as I thought that, of course, then it all narrowed down again.	Fear of a loss of self disrupts the experience of expanded consciousness.	**Expanded consciousness.**
23. Everything had a meaning, and yet nothing had a meaning at the same time. It was a sense of such... the meaning was such beauty and order and symmetry and harmony and yet how do I explain that, and yet it wasn't meaningful either.	Description of a paradoxical experience of harmony and beauty where everything has meaning and is meaningless at the same time.	**Harmony.** **Beauty.**
Experience # 5.6: Physical Pain 24. **I.** I hear the energy level is one really important thing. And then sometimes it's physical pain that comes with it? **P.** I've had very intense physical pain at times, pain beyond pain, that no pain killer or nothing could ever help.	The experience of energy is associated with intense physical pain.	**Energy.**
25. I would sometimes feel like I was plugged into an electrical socket with 220 volts of electricity going through me with a body that could only stand 110, and I would, if I slept an hour a night I was lucky.	Energy is described as similar to electrical energy and has the effect of disrupting sleep.	**Energy**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience # 5.7: Giving a Talk 26. And in the middle of the talk the energy sort of, this loving energy kind of coming...	Describes feeling a rush of loving energy.	**Energy** **Love.**
27. I should just let it flow, and so I did, and I was just overcome with love... all of a sudden I felt really loved.	Giving up control leads to a feeling of being "overcome" with love.	**Love.**

Participant # 6: Ellen

The sixth , and last, participant, whom I will call Ellen, is a forty-year-old married woman with four children who was brought up in the Lutheran church. She stated that her family was not seriously involved with the church and that her father only attended at weddings or funerals. Ellen was born in Denmark and moved to Canada when she was about two years old. She grew up in a family of eight children. Ellen has a university degree in Commerce and is presently busy as a full time mother of her four girls. She described herself as an "ordinary", "everyday" person and reported being confused about why she has experienced these unusual and dramatic experiences that in retrospect she now identifies as spiritual experiences.

Ellen described a total of five spiritual experiences and provided examples of seven of the ten states of awareness. Ellen's first reported experience took place while she was walking on a beautiful day and is described as an awareness of being "connected" with her surroundings to such an extent that she was a part of everything and everything was a part

of her. This awareness is described as feeling "one" with her surroundings and as an expansion of herself. The second reported experience happened to Ellen as she was going about her daily chores and occurred at a time when she feeling very stressed by the burden of family responsibilities. In this second experience Ellen describes feeling a powerful rush of energy that moved up her spine and out through her head. The movement of energy up her spine was accompanied by the perception of an "incredible" light and a "knowing" that there is a God. It is interesting to note that this experience included four of the ten identified states of awareness.

Ellen's third reported experience involved entering a trance and experiencing a vision of a biblical figure and a vision of beautiful scenes in nature. She reported that after having the vision she slipped into a sleep state and when she awoke she felt a burning sensation along her spine. Ellen's fourth reported experience was similar to the third in that she had a vision of an outdoor scene and she noted that the vision was accompanied by a loud sound, a "roar." Ellen's last reported experience is perhaps the most dramatic of all the reported experiences in that she described being visited by Jesus. She reports that she was lying on her bed feeling quite distraught when Jesus appeared to her and was present, in a very real way, to her sense of sight and touch.

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Participant # 6 **Experience #6.1:** A Beautiful Day 1. But it was sort of, I was outside one day, and it was just a beautiful day, and it was sort of a, I had a sense of feeling really connected and I knew that I would live forever.	Describes feeling connected to her surroundings with an accompanying insight that she would live forever.	**Connectedness.**
2. Sort of like, hard to describe, it's a sense of one in all and all in one. Like I was part of everything and everything was part of me. It was a, just kind of a neat experience. Like it just felt good. It felt really okay.	Connectedness described as "I was a part of everything and everything was a part of me" and as a positive, rewarding experience.	**Connectedness.**
3. I guess to all of life, like you feel like, sort of being... I felt more like it was up above me, though, like it was more of an upper connection, although just sort of everything became one, it wasn't like there was dirt or sky or me, or, it was just sort of an expansion of whatever, like me.	Connectedness feeling described as being connected to "something" up above but also as an experience of everything becoming "one?"	**Connectedness.**
4. P. ...it was just sort of an expansion of whatever, like me. It was just like... I. An expansion of you, an expansion of yourself, and who you were? P. Yeah.	The experience of connectedness is also described as an expansion of the self.	**Connectedness.** **Expanded consciousness.**
Experience # 6.2: Energy Up the Spine 5. ...I saw this most incredible, incredible light. And it was just like I knew, I knew in that instant there was a God.	Light is experienced as "incredible" and is accompanied by a strong intuition that there is a God.	**Light.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
6. ...it was the sense of something coming back down into my body, and I was driven to my knees and it was just like I felt this incredible mental, physical and emotional anguish, ...	Energy is experienced as "returning" to the body and is associated with mental, physical and emotional pain.	**Energy.**
7. Like something went shwoo-oo, just shot up through my spine, actually on the one side, was my feeling about what happened. It shot up through and up through my head.	Energy is experienced as "shooting" up through the head.	**Energy.**
8. Yeah, almost like a plug or something that kind of phoo, just fired through, I mean it all happened in probably seconds.	The experience of energy moving up the spine described as like a plug being released. The experience lasts only a few seconds.	**Energy.**
9. Yeah, it was incredible light, I could see it. I don't know if, you see sometimes when I have those experiences it's like I have a hard time knowing whether it's sort of in me or outside of me.	Describes an uncertainty of whether light is perceived "outside" or "inside" of her.	**Light.**
10. **I.** How long was the light seen there? **P.** Oh, probably a couple of seconds. I mean, all of it happened in probably about thirty seconds to a minute at the most, like it was so quick.	Perception of light lasts briefly; thirty seconds to a minute.	**Light.**
11. ...but at the time I had no idea because I didn't get an image of a being or a thing or anything like that. I just knew there was a God, it was just like something it was like every cell in my body knew there was a God.	Associated with the perception of light is an immediate awareness, or a "knowing" that there is a God.	**Light.** **Presence of other.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
12. But it's an intelligence, it's a loving presence, and the light is love. Because I felt incredibly loved. Like I did, there was an incredible sense of being loved.	Light is experienced and described as a loving presence and intelligence.	**Light.** **Love.**
13. Yeah, oh it was, that light experience was incredibly wonderful, like it was so nice, so kind, so loving, so, I don't know, so connected to love and light. And then it's sort of like you're driven back into your physical body and it's very painful.	Perceiving light described as wonderful and the cessation of the experience is described as physically painful.	**Light.**
14. Like I don't know how to describe it, it's almost like you're, like there's two levels of awareness maybe going on, two levels of consciousness, because I was very aware of my physical presence, my physical body, although it seemed to kind of take second place to the experience of the light.	Describes being aware of her physical presence and also moving beyond or out of her physical presence.	**Expanded consciousness.**
15. ...everything, mental, physically, emotional, I dropped to my knees it felt so painful, like the pain is sort of like every cell in your body just aches and hurts, and it's like you know, I don't know how to describe it, but I've noticed that from other experiences.	Experience of intense influx of energy is followed by excruciating physical pain.	**Energy.**
16 . **I**. How long did the painful part last. **P**. Again, a few seconds, you know, I got up, sort of brushed off, and it was, whew, well, I don' think I want to do that again.	Pain following the influx of energy lasts only a few seconds.	**Energy.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
17. Yeah, but it's like an all pervasive kind of pain. It's not any place in particular or any type in particular. I think I already said this, it's like every cell in your body hurts, and I don't know why but it just did.	Physical pain associated with energy experience is described as all pervasive, like "every cell in the body aches."	**Energy.**
Experience # 6.3: Vision of King 18. And then what I could see was like it was like this golden throne, and it was spinning and spinning, and it was going around and around and around, and I thought, Well what is that? And then I thought, it's King Nebuchadnezer.	Participant describes "seeing" an image of a biblical figure that she had limited previous familiarity with.	**Vision/Trance.**
19. And then that just sort of cleared, and I could see, like, sort of in a mountainous area, and it was, oh, it was beautiful, it was like there were trees everywhere, up and down the mountains. I'm just envisioning what I saw, okay, and it went down into this valley, and it was just these lush green trees, and it was so beautiful.	Vision shifts rapidly between different "scenes" and is described as a positive, satisfying experience.	**Vision/Trance.**
20. But when I awoke it was like I could feel this burning up my spine, it went up the right side, it went up alongside the spine into my head, and I thought, well that's really weird, how come it's only on one side. And then I felt this pulsing and throbbing on the base of my spine and it shot up the other side.	Describes a burning sensation along her spine and into her head. Energy at the base of her spine described as pulsing and throbbing.	**Energy.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
21. Well, it, yeah, that one didn't hurt so much, but it was a burning, but it was a burning sensation, definitely, that's not the experience I had after my daughter was born, that was like something moving up my spine and down, but this was like a burning sensation, I could feel it all along my spine, sort of from the base all the way up into my head. And it was a burning, prickling sensation.	Energy is described as a burning and prickly sensation along the spine.	**Energy.**
Experience # 6.4: Vision of Heavens		
22. Yeah, I heard it, it was a roar, and the heavens opened, like I had a vision of, like, I could see mountains and sky and it was just like, it was just all there. I'm in my house and yet I'm having this clear vision of this sort of an outdoor scene.	Vision is accompanied by a loud sound, a "roar", and is experienced as clear and realistic.	**Vision/Trance.**
23. I mean, again, it was okay when it was happening. It was later when you sort of try to rationalize it and your thinking process kicks in and you go, Oh my God, now what, how do I do this. Like what ever this is, I wanted it to stop, because there had been a period of months where a lot of this stuff was going on.	Feelings of confusion and fear are associated with having a vision experience. The participant describes wanting the vision experiences to stop.	**Vision/Trance.**
24. For me there was a lot of fear associated with what was going on, not at the time but after, because I didn't understand it and I had no idea what was happening or why it was happening, and I was just like you know, oh I couldn't understand it at all, I was just...just really searching, like what is going on and why has this been happening to me.	Participant describes feeling intense fear after her vision experiences and confusion related to the question of why the experiences were happening to her.	**Vision/Trance.**

Text	Interpretation	State of Awareness
Experience # 6.5: Vision of Jesus 25. I surrendered, I'd done it all, and I was just laying on my bed and I just felt just really distraught. And he just appeared in my room, he was just there, it was a very real presence.	Vision experience is preceded by what is described as surrendering and is experienced as a real "presence."	**Vision/Trance.** **Presence of other.**
26. ...definitely, ... yeah, I could see him. Yeah, he just came and sat beside me on the bed, and I was laying on my stomach, and he just patted me on the back and said, There, there, child, and it was just a real comforting presence...	Vision of Jesus is described as being present to her sense of sight as well as touch. Also, described as a comforting presence.	**Vision/Trance.** **Presence of other.**

States of Awareness Table

Before moving on to the generalized interpretations, the following page provides a table depicting the results. The numbers in the columns represent the total number of meaning units reported by each participant for each "state of awareness." It is important to note that not all of the participants provided descriptions of each of the states. In fact, some of the "states" were only reported by as few as two or three of the participants. The state "presence of other" was the only state reported by all of the participants. However, as stated earlier the relative frequency of reported states is not a reflection of the validity of the reported experience. Less commonly reported states are still considered meaningful examples of spiritual experience.

Table #1 - STATES OF AWARENESS

PARTICIPANTS

State of Awareness	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	Totals
Beauty/Awe	1	1	4	4	1	-	11
Harmony	1	1	3	3	2	-	10
Light	5	-	5	1	6	6	23
Connectedness	3	3	7	2	-	4	19
Love	-	10	7	3	3	1	24
Presence of Other	3	6	6	3	1	3	22
Energy	2	-	-	-	11	8	21
Guiding Intuition	2	-	-	-	4	-	6
Expanded Consciousness	2	-	-	7	3	2	14
Vision/Trance	3	-	-	10	-	7	20
Totals:	22	21	32	33	31	31	170

Note: The totals column on the right represents the total number of meaning units that were reported under each "state." The totals row on the bottom represents the total number of meaning units that each participant reported.

Generalized Interpretations

In this section I provide a generalized interpretation of each of the "states of awareness." After gathering all of the interpretations and actual quotes that were identified within each state of awareness, I formulated a composite, generalized interpretation of that state of awareness. The participant's descriptions of each of the states of awareness were remarkably consistent *within* each of the identified "states." The following generalized interpretations include the interpretations of both the characteristic descriptions of each "state of awareness" and the uncharacteristic descriptions provided by the participants.

In order to formulate the generalized interpretations I attempted to capture a "sense" of the common characterizations of each particular identified state and combine these characterizations into a general statement. However, I also included an interpretation of the uncommon characterizations of each state so as not to lose the diversity of the experience. Remember, from an interpretive phenomenological perspective the uncharacteristic reports of experience are of equal importance in an understanding of the phenomenon.

1) Beauty\Awe:

The most frequently reported theme that characterized this state of awareness was an intensely heightened appreciation of the participant's surroundings and an accompanying sense of awe. The participants, often using a reverent tone of voice, described experiencing a perception of the exquisite beauty of their surroundings. The

experience was described primarily as visual and the participants expressed surprise at how their visual perception appeared altered. The visual quality of this state of awareness is captured in the following two quotes;

> **"..and then afterwards I went out and the grass looked greener, it sharpened everything. Sharpened perception, so you feel as if the edges of things are much clearer, the depth perception feels much better."** - Participant 1(13)*

> **"It was almost perceiving it with different eyes. Like the eyes were mine, but the eyes weren't mine."** - Participant 4(23)

The perception of beauty is described as being experienced in the particular, as the "vividness" of the color green, to a perception of beauty on the grand scale of the universe itself, as exemplified in the following quote;

> **"...and there was a sense of, kind of almost like looking up at the universe and feeling for a moment that what a beautiful place this is, what a wonderful place this is, and not just where I was standing but just this universe is so incredible..."**
> - Participant 3(21)

One of the participants described not only experiencing a perception of her surroundings being beautiful, but also a beauty within herself;

> **"I began to see beauty, beauty within myself as well as outside of myself, and it was sort of like it belonged to me and it was all mine,..."** - Participant 4(21)

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* The number in brackets represents the meaning units that are presented in the previous analysis section.

I get the impression that a sense of the connectedness or oneness with the beauty is also being expressed in the above quote where the participant states "and it was sort of like it belonged to me and it was all mine." There is also the impression that the participants are describing a state of awareness where it is as if a veil is being lifted and they can see *through* to the incredible beauty inherent in the object of their perception, for example;

> **"It was almost perceiving it with different eyes. Like the eyes were mine, but the eyes weren't mine. Like they were larger eyes than mine that could see, could see the essence of the trees, and the lake and the mist and the water and the sky."** - Participant 4(23)

As with all the described states, the quality of the awareness seemed to be experienced at different levels of intensity depending on the person and/or the particular episode. In other words, there appears to be a continuum where beauty might be seen specifically in the color of the grass or in everything the individuals set their eyes upon. As we can see in the following quote, participant 5 related that everything she looked at seemed beautiful;

> **"There was an extraordinary beauty in absolutely everything, and there seemed to be a design to everything, everything meant something, ...it was like living in paradise."** - Participant 5

This reference to the "meaningfulness" of their surroundings was noted by a number of the participants and was also described as perceiving the incredible "intelligence" in the design of the universe. Finally, running through many of the descriptions of this experience is a sense of awe. The awe is apparent as much in the tone

of voice and other non-verbal cues as it is in the text itself. The participants describe their surroundings in terms of respect and reverence. Associated with the sense of awe is a deep appreciation for the surroundings. Participant 3 made a point of emphasizing that he felt a powerful sense of gratitude when appreciating the intense beauty of his surroundings. The gratefulness was experienced "hand in hand" with the sense of awe. In the following quote the participant describes her experience of being alone in the woods;

> **"...it was like being in a very holy place and needing to whisper...great, very awesome sort of respect."** - Participant 4(28)

In summary, then, in this state of awareness the participants seem to be perceiving their surroundings through different "glasses," with the common theme being an intense appreciation of the beauty in and around them.

2) <u>Harmony:</u>

This state of awareness is perhaps best characterized as a strong intuition or a "knowing." Five of the six participants use very similar language to describe a deeply "sensed meaning" or awareness that things are "okay" both within themselves and/or in the whole of the universe. The term "harmony" seems to capture the overall quality of this state of awareness. Note the altered perception of self in the following quotes, where the participants describe an acceptance of who they are;

> **"Yeah, being completely integrated, being completely, instead of shattered and being so fragmented as I felt in my school life, home life, uh, social life."** - Participant 1(7)

"There was definitely all of a sudden a kind of acceptance of self, a feeling I'm okay, and everything's okay, you don't have to worry. You know, just for that moment everything was okay..." - Participant 3(19)

Another theme that seems to be associated with this harmonious state of awareness is a sense of security, a sense that everything will turn out okay. The participants describe a feeling of being protected;

"...it was buoyant, there was a sense of buoyancy. It wasn't joyous, but it was, but there was buoyancy and a peacefulness and a serenity and an 'It's okay'. " - Participant 2(6)

"I heard beautiful music and there was a very powerful feeling of peace and that everything was going to be looked after and that I was fine."
- Participant 4(3)

"It was a knowing, it was, that was the most interesting part about it, it was just a knowing that I, that this was perfectly safe." - Participant 4(12)

In the following quote the participant describes what seems to be the same quality of harmony or acceptance. She is referring to the feeling she gets when she becomes aware of a guiding intuition;

I. "Is it sometimes, I mean in that example, is it sometimes nerve racking or disturbing when you hear that?"
P. "Oddly enough, no, it's actually perfectly peaceful. It's a knowing that I have, and I usually feel perfectly peaceful about it though I know that it maybe is at times announcing a traumatic event." - Participant 5(5)

Finally, there is the description of this awareness of harmony on the level of the universe itself. The following quotes from participant 3 capture the impact this awareness seems to have had on his worldview and his view of himself;

> **"...again I had this moment of a real strong faith, in my life, a strong faith in the world and in the universe, this sense that I really belonged, you know, I really belonged here, that life really mattered and that I could just trust that things would be okay.** - Participant 3(23)

> **"Just a feeling that the universe, that underneath it all there was just the basic direction of the universe was right and was good."** - Participant 3(22)

The following quote from participant 5 reflects the paradoxical nature of this kind of awareness and draws our attention to some of the fascinating and profound insights that accompany the awareness;

> **"Everything had a meaning, and yet nothing had a meaning at the same time. It was a sense of such... the meaning was such beauty and order and symmetry and harmony and yet how do I explain that, and yet it wasn't meaningful either."** - Participant 5(23)

3) <u>Light:</u>

At the simplest level of sensation, this state of awareness is characterized by the perception of a bright and beautiful light. The intensely experienced light is perceived by the participants variously as both within themselves and external to themselves. The light may be perceived as having a location "outside" of the person, as in the following quote;

"And I looked up and the corner of the room where the altar was, was full of light." - Participant 1(2)

Or, the perception of light is described as a multi-sensory, holistic experience where the light is experienced pervasively both within and without them;

"I remember honestly feeling and seeing this light, this white light that was surrounding me and in me, above me, below me, whatever.." - Participant 3(14)

"I have a visual impression, but I also have a strong feeling impression ...And it was just like a whole body experience, it wasn't my head and then my body, it was just sort of a whole experience." - Participant 3(17)

"I mean, the light was, probably I was experiencing the light with all of my senses... I just filled up with light." - Participant 5(13)

"Yeah, it was incredible light, I could see it. I don't know if, you see... sometimes when I have those experiences it's like I have a hard time knowing whether it's sort of in me or outside of me." - Participant 6(9)

There was also a hint at connectedness associated with the perception of light. The participants describe being one with the light, as revealed in the following quotes;

"It was like I was in a bubble, and yet it wasn't a bubble that was choking me. I was expanding and becoming part of it." - Participant 1(4)

P. "Just like, like that's what I was, like I am light."
I. "So an experience of *being* light?"
P. "Being light, yeah, I guess that's what you could call it." - Participant 5(12)

The experience of light is clearly very satisfying and the participants describe it as being one of joy, ecstasy and of being cleansed;

> **"More of it was like joy, that's the word I would use to describe the emotions."** - Participant 3(18)

> **"Well, it's, well I guess the closest thing I can draw it to is the same sense one gets through sexual ecstasy. This was an ecstatic moment."** - Participant 1(5)

> **"...this white light that was surrounding me and in me, above me, below me, whatever and absolutely, I don't know, kind of cleansing my body."** - Participant 3(14)

The perception of light was frequently described as being associated with an intense experience of being loved and an awareness that there is a God. Light/Love/God was experienced as a simultaneous triad with each of the words seemingly being used interchangeably. This overlap is demonstrated in the following quotes;

> **"And I did experience it as a loving God."** - Participant 3(16)

> **"...and very loved, just felt love and love, just felt deeply loved and cradled in love, and very loving, very open, yeah.** - Participant 5(20)

> **"But it's an intelligence, it's a loving presence, and the light is love. Because I felt incredibly loved. Like I did, there was an incredible sense of being loved."** - Participant 6(12)

From Participant 6 we get the impression that her awareness of there being a God comes simply from being loved by the light as opposed to seeing an image of a being;

> **"...I saw this most incredible, incredible light. And it was just like I knew, I knew in that instant there was a God....but at the time I had no idea because I didn't get an image of a being or a thing or anything like that. I just knew there was a God, it was just like something ...it was like every cell in my body knew there was a God."** - Participant 6(5)

It is also worth noting that in the above quote the awareness of there being a God is described as "a knowing" that is experienced at the level of the body, rather than a more intellectually held "belief."

Finally from Participant 4 we get the following description which occurred during an experience where she felt she had left her body. Light is described as representing a person's essence or soul. She also provides a fascinating description of being pulled by the magnetism of the "big light";

> **"Their inner light, or their essence or their soul. Their being. And then I left, it was a very quick movement from them over the ocean where the dolphins and whales were playing, and then up to the big light. And when I approached the big light, there was a, almost like a magnetism, there was such a warmth or such a pull to stay with the big light."** - Participant 4(18)

4) <u>Connectedness:</u>

This state of awareness is labeled "connectedness" because the participants consistently describe feeling intensely *connected* to their surroundings. Being connected seems to be experienced as an extension of identity or self outwards to one's surroundings or to another person. The participants' descriptions include examples of their identity or

self merging and becoming "one" with nature, with an intense light, or with another person;

> **"Well, there didn't seem to be a separation between me or the tree or nature, like my boundaries weren't there. I could float into the tree and the tree could float into me, there didn't seem to be any barrier."** -Participant 4(29)

In the following example the participant describes becoming "part" of the light;

> **"It was like I was in a bubble, and yet it wasn't a bubble that was choking me. I was expanding and becoming part of it."** - Participant 1(4)

In this next example the participant is describing an intense feeling of connecting or communing with the spirit of her deceased mother;

> **"Connecting, in some way...it was meshed, it really was merged, there was a real sense of one-ness there."** - Participant 2(5)

The descriptions of connectedness seem to reflect a general feeling of awe at being part of "something" larger than the self. There is a quality of wonder in these descriptions, three of which are below;

> **"And I had a really powerful sense of, there is something beyond, without having any way of saying what the beyond was at all."** - Participant 2(9)

> **"I felt all alone, very, very much alone, physically, from other people, yet just, it was the first I really remember having the sense of something much, much bigger than myself."** - Participant 3(6)

> **"Sort of like, hard to describe, it's a sense of one in all and all in one. Like I was part of everything and everything was part of me."** - Participant 6(6)

Participant 3 provided some richly detailed descriptions of his experience of connectedness, stating that the awareness resulted in a profound shift in his identity;

> **"Yeah, it was a different sense of myself. And the only way I can describe it I think is as a kind of an opening downwards into myself would be the best metaphor to use."** - Participant 3(12)

He also described the awareness as a sense that everything was "alive", this aliveness is captured in the following quote;

> **"Yeah, just kind of a heartbeat inside myself and inside of everything else."** - Participant 3(9)

Finally, Participant 6 provides a description of connectedness that shows some overlap with the state of awareness labeled "Expanded Consciousness." Feeling connected seems to be an awareness where consciousness moves "outward" beyond the individual's boundaries to include their surroundings;

> **"I guess to all of life, like you feel like, sort of being...I felt more like it was up above me, though, like it was more of an upper connection, although just sort of everything became one, it wasn't like there was dirt or sky or me, or, it was just sort of an expansion of whatever, like me."** - Participant 6(3)

5) <u>Love:</u>

This state of awareness is characterized by the experience of receiving love and giving love. This awareness seemed to be central to the participants' descriptions of their spiritual experiences. Frequently, love was concurrently experienced with other overlapping states of awareness. Although the various participants might have described

their awareness of being that of connectedness, energy, or light, in many cases the word *love* was used interchangeably with these terms. In the following quote note how the other descriptors, such as "intelligence", "presence", and "light", are eventually subsumed under the descriptor love;

> **"But it's an intelligence, it's a loving presence, and the light is love. Because I felt incredibly loved. Like I did, there was an incredible sense of being loved."** - Participant 6(12)

For some of the participants this state of awareness was experienced as an overwhelming outpouring of love emanating from them. The intensity of this *love energy* is captured in the following quote from participant 2, who is describing a feeling she had while being contemplative in a cathedral;

> **"It was warm, it was very warm, it was like molten gold, it was smooth, it was shiny, it radiated, it radiated, it was, and it was overwhelming."** - Participant 2(13)

Participant 2 goes on to describe how the intense loving energy was directed outwards to the whole world;

> **"But yet quite impersonal, there was no person associated with it. I felt, I felt loving, I felt like I wanted to embrace the world, I wanted to embrace everything."** - Participant 2(16)

And in a similar vein from participant 3;

> **"I guess the best word, if we used it carefully, would be love. Definitely a warmth towards other people. You know, kind of a feeling of having been loved and therefore that love wants to keep on loving somehow."**
> - Participant 3(25)

The flip side of the coin of giving love, was a description of a powerful awareness of receiving love. One of the participants described the source of love as that of her deceased mother, another described the source as coming from a light which is identified as God, while another simply describes feeling loved without identifying the source;

> **"Yeah, the words that I put to it as I was experiencing it was love, I experienced it as my mother's love**. - Participant 2(7)

> **"I remember honestly feeling and seeing this light, this white light that was surrounding me and in me, above me, below me, whatever and absolutely, I don't know, kind of cleansing my body...and I did experience it as a loving God...."** - Participant 3(14)

> **"I should just let it flow, and so I did, and I was just overcome with love...all of a sudden I felt really loved."** - Participant 5(27)

In the following quotes, gratitude is identified as accompanying the experience of feeling loved;

> **"Grateful. It was grateful, it was enormously, enormously, just thankful."** - Participant 2(12)

> **"And I did experience it as a loving God. You know the other feeling that came with that was gratitude, I just remember feeling really grateful..."** - Participant 3(16)

Participant 3 emphasized that for him, feeling thankful and grateful was central to the experience. The other theme associated with feeling loved is an acceptance of self and a feeling of being nurtured and supported by the loving energy, as in the following quotes;

> **"...it was very comforting and very peaceful, and I was just really reassured**

that I was looked after...and I was just really loved and supported."
- Participant 4(10)

"There was definitely all of a sudden a kind of acceptance of self, a feeling I'm okay, and everything's okay, you don't have to worry. You know, just for that moment everything was okay..." - Participant 3(19)

"It was very, I think very transforming inside myself because I felt very secure again, and very peaceful, and sort of the all encompassing loving presence." - Participant 4(15)

Finally, participant 2 describes what seems like a paradox, the overwhelming, joyous feeling of love is experienced as pain and as being too much to bear;

"...it would be just very centered around the heart, and it was like this molten something, that was so intense it was almost impossible to bear. And it was very joyous, and loving, I suppose in a way, but it was so joyous that it was painful." - Participant 2(10)

6) <u>Energy</u>

This state of awareness is characterized by a common theme of experiencing an intense sensation of energy in the body. Although only three of the participants described a state of awareness where they specifically used the term "energy" as an adjective, it was my impression that many of the experiences seemed to have an energizing quality about them. Participant 1 describes a pleasurable, ecstatic feeling of energy during her experience of becoming "one" with the light, as in the following quote;

> **"...where you feel like the fireworks have gone off in your head, and full of energy, just like you're touching an energy field.** - Participant 1(6)

Participant 5 and participant 6 provided numerous descriptions, many of which were quite similar, of experiencing an intense energy in their bodies. Both participants describe an awareness of energy moving up their spine and of also having, at times, excruciating pain associated with these experiences. In the following quotes note the reoccurring description of energy moving up the spine;

> **"It was like a rush of energy up my spine. And my body went just stiff. My arms were thrown up over my head, I mean, like it was moving me. I had no control over it. At least I felt like that."** - Participant 5(10)

> **"Like something went shwoo-oo, just shot up through my spine, actually on the one side, was my feeling about what happened. It shot up through and up through my head."** - Participant 6(7)

These intense encounters with energy are described as both a very satisfying, ecstatic experience and as a excruciatingly painful one. In the following quote participant 5 describes the ecstasy accompanying the movement of energy up the spine;

> **"...and all of sudden this sensation starts coming up my spine again, only this time it was like real ecstasy, and it just came up just sort of an inch, an inch, inch at a time, until I was filled with ecstasy."** - Participant 5(15)

And again from participant 5, note the unusual and dramatic quality of the experience in the following quote;

> **"And at that time again, the energy was moving me. And so I got up and stood up and I was actually standing on my feet and rocking back and forth**

like this, like a tree blowing in the wind, but with the roots still connected to the ground, and the energy just felt like it was just pouring through my finger tips, and it was really quite a remarkable experience."
- Participant 5(16)

Both participant 5 and participant 6 describe experiencing a perception of light associated with the awareness of energy, as in the following quotes;

"And in this case it felt kind of strange, I didn't know what to do, and finally it just sort of threw me into a ramrod stiff position, like my arms were thrown up over my head, and my body just went stiff as a ramrod, and I just filled up with light." - Participant 5(7)

"It was like something went up my back, and I just saw this incredible light and again I knew in that instant there was a God." - Participant 6(5)

Finally, there are descriptions of excruciating pain accompanying these experiences of energy. Participants 5 and 6 describe encountering numerous experiences over the years where they suffered severe physical pain and disorientation. Both participants related that it was only after having a number of these experiences that they began to associate the pain as being integral to the spiritual experience itself. The following quotes capture the quality and severity of the pain associated with these experiences;

I. "I hear the energy level is one really important thing. And then sometimes it's physical pain that comes with it?"
P. "I've had very intense physical pain at times, pain beyond pain, that no pain killer or nothing could ever help." - Participant 5(24)

> **"...everything, mental, physically, emotional, I dropped to my knees it felt so painful, like the pain is sort of like every cell in your body just aches and hurts, and it's like you know, I don't know how to describe it, but I've noticed that from other experiences.** - Participant 6(15)

7) <u>Presence of Other:</u>

The outstanding characteristic of this state of awareness is the participants' description of being aware of a comforting presence. There may or may not be a visual perception of the "presence", but the common theme is a very tangible awareness that "someone" is there comforting them and supporting them. The following quote reveals some of the qualities of this experience;

> **"Well, that it was a presence of holiness... the air felt warmer and like there was a comfort...There was, like I was not alone in that room. There was another presence..."** - Participant 1(1)

The participants variously describe the presence as being that of God, of an Angel, of their deceased mother, or as simply being unknown, but in all the descriptions the experience is a supportive and joyful one. This experience of joy is noted in the following quote where the presence is described as being that of God;

> **"I guess joy is the best word to describe the emotion that I had never felt in my life, and at that time I mean, the language I would have used would definitely say, this is an experience of God, a God that loved me and cared about me, and was with me."** - Participant 3(13)

One of the participants described the awareness of being in contact with her deceased mother's spiritual presence and feeling powerfully loved by that presence;

"...like my shell was around her spirit, or her essence, or whatever, it was that she had stood for. And it was like it was refined, like all the sort of daily fallibility's and so on were gone and that sense of my mother, it was pure and it was loving, refined, cleansed,..." - Participant 2(2)

The above participant also related that during this experience she had a simultaneous awareness of there being "something beyond";

"And I had a really powerful sense of, there is something beyond, without having any way of saying what the beyond was at all." - Participant 2(9)

According to participant 3, his sense of a presence was that of a something much bigger than himself;

"I felt all alone, very, very much alone, physically, from other people, yet just, it was the first I really remember having the sense of something much, much bigger than myself." - Participant 3(6)

In the most dramatic example of being comforted by a spiritual presence, the participant describes being visited by Jesus;

"...definitely, ... yeah, I could see him. Yeah, he just came and sat beside me on the bed, and I was laying on my stomach, and he just patted me on the back and said, There, there, child, and it was just a real comforting presence..." - Participant 6(26)

All of the participants' descriptions seemed to include a quality of surprise and bafflement associated with how "real" and tangible the presence felt. The tangible quality of the awareness is clearly reflected in the following quote;

"And there was a voice there that said, it's all right, you're safe. Just lean back on me and I will support you, and it was like a feeling of being back

against somebody or something and just being sort of held and supported there." - Participant 5(14)

Often accompanying this awareness of the presence of "Other" was a powerful experience of being loved by that presence. Participant 6 described feeling overwhelmingly "loved" by "light" and stated that she experienced a powerful "knowing" that the light was God. However, she noted that ever since that experience her understanding of God has changed from a conception of God as an "individual being" to a "loving intelligence" that is ever present and all pervasive. The quality of the experience of love associated with this state of awareness is captured under it's own heading, "Love", which is described below.

8) <u>Guiding Intuition:</u>

The descriptions of this state of awareness were relatively brief. Therefore, the characterizations of this state are somewhat lacking in comparison to the rich detail that the participants provided for the other states. The awareness seems to be characterized by a strong intuition or inner voice that provides guidance or knowledge. In the relatively few reported descriptions of this awareness, the inner voice appears to be of a quality that makes it clearly stand out as distinct from usual thought processes. The following quote from participant 5 makes note of this distinction;

P. "...as we're driving from there to Montana this voice is saying to me, 'Well, now you're going to get to see the other side of what it could be like' ."
I. So when you say this voice, do you feel that you somehow, is it like an intuition?

P. It's an intuition, it's not an audible voice...It's the only way I know how to describe it, because it is, when I get this kind of intuition it's very specific, and it's different from my usual thought processes. Different enough that I pay attention to it." - Participant 5(1)

In the following quote Participant 5 goes on to describe how the source of the "voice" seems to be internal and how she experiences the awareness as information being provided to her;

I. "So it's like a thought that doesn't seem, that stands out, that feels like maybe it's not part of your own usual thinking, or your own thought, but it feels like it's coming from the outside?"
P. "No, it's inside myself, it's inside myself. It has a depth to it, and it usually has something specific, some specific information to give me. And I know I need to pay attention to it, although I don't always." - Participant 5(3)

Participant 1 describes being inspired by an intense intuition that she wrote down and later crafted into a play. Both participants' descriptions of the awareness suggest that the internal voice provides them with helpful guidance. In the following quote participant 5 describes "receiving" information that she later used to write a play on midwifery;

"And all of a sudden I had this vision in my head and I said, wow, I got to get this. And I went away and I sat down at my computer, and it was like I was taking notes." - Participant 1(17)

In the following quote it is interesting to note that the intuition is described as a "gift";

I. "So you had a sense of this, this imagery, these ideas, these beliefs, or no, these..."
P. ... "actions."

I. "...actions, they were coming to you almost, were coming to you from somewhere else, and you didn't have to work at it?"
P. "...Yea, right, like gifts." - Participant 1

This same participant also described the awareness as being one where she felt connected to people from the past and, presumably then, it was this connection that was providing her with the guidance and information;

"...you feel like you've been possessed, that you've gotten, that you're hooked up in your head back to another, and another and another. That you're linked up, not just integrated to yourself but connected all the way back." - Participant 1(18)

Participant 5 stated that she has experienced numerous "guiding intuitions" and that often the intuitions were of a prophetic quality. In the following quote she describes the experience of "receiving" an intuition that predicted a traumatic event, specifically, the still birth of her granddaughter. Note the similarity to the state of awareness described as "Harmony" above;

I. "Is it sometimes, I mean in that example, is it sometimes nerve racking or disturbing when you hear that?"
P. "Oddly enough, no, it's actually perfectly peaceful. It's a knowing that I have, and I usually feel perfectly peaceful about it though I know that it maybe is at times announcing a traumatic event." - Participant 5(5)

9) <u>Expanded Consciousness:</u>

This state of awareness stands out from the previous seven as being an even more dramatic example of a non-ordinary state of consciousness. The descriptions of this

awareness suggest that the individuals' consciousness seems to "expand" and become free from the fixed locality of their mind/body. The quality of this expansion of consciousness appears to be such that the individuals are aware of their limited consciousness as well as a consciousness that moves beyond the confines of their mind/body. This expanded state of awareness is evident in the following quotes;

> **"I felt something like that, out of body and in body at the same time. Being separated from myself, looking at myself...Well, kind of that of being totally there but also able to watch."** - Participant 1(11)

> **"...and I felt myself leaving my body. I could feel myself sitting on the chair, but I felt myself leaving through my head..."** - Participant 4(13)

> **P. "...it was just sort of an expansion of whatever, like me. It was just like..."**
> **I. "An expansion of you, an expansion of yourself, and who you were?"**
> **P. "Yeah."** - Participant 6(4)

Although most of the participants' descriptions seem to suggest that the expansion process is subtle, participant 4 describes a dramatic process of feeling "herself" being "pulled" or "pushed" through the top of her head;

> **"I guess it was my awareness, but I felt like it was part of me that was leaving through the top of my head. I could feel myself being pulled out, through the top of my head or pushing through this, like a circle around my head that I was pushing through a circle of something here, there was a very tight band around my head."** - Participant 4(16)

Participant 4 goes on to describe that from her expanded state of awareness she was able to perceive "light" within people and also able to travel over the ocean and up to what she describes as "the big light";

> **"...but I left my body, and I went around the room and I saw everyone's light within them. And then I left the room and I went over the ocean and played with the dolphins and whales for a while and then I went to the big light, and I did not want to leave."** - Participant 4(14)

The fascinating, dream-like quality of this state of awareness is reflected in the following quote, also from participant 4;

> **I. "So it was like a sense of your consciousness or awareness was not in your body, it was above the room and you could perceive from there some way... perceive the light?"**
> **P. "Their inner light, or their essence or their soul. Their being. And then I left, it was a very quick movement from them over the ocean where the dolphins and whales were playing, and then up to the big light. And when I approached the big light, there was a , almost like a magnetism, there was such a warmth or such a pull to stay with the big light."** - Participant 4(18)

Although the quality of the awareness may sound dream-like, participant 4 reported the following when asked if the experience was like a dream;

> **"It's not like a dream state. It's very real,...And it was very, very tactile, very real. As though I were in my body."** - Participant 4(20)

The above participant also stated that when she was in the state of expanded consciousness she felt a "tremendous" amount of energy. Participant 5 describes a more

subtle experience in the following quote, where she has a detailed perceptual awareness of the room she is in even though her eyes are closed;

> **"And even though I had my eyes closed I could see everything in the room in detail. If there had been a sign on the wall on the opposite side of the room I would have been able to read it,...are my eyes closed or are they open,...I still don't have an explanation for how that could be except to say that I guess my consciousness isn't, maybe doesn't reside just in my body, you know."**
> - Participant 5(19)

The description of this state of awareness seems to overlap with the *connectedness* state of awareness described earlier. It appears that when the individual's consciousness expands it may be similar to the awareness of becoming part of, or "one" with, one's surroundings. The similarity and overlap between the two states of awareness are reflected in the following quote;

> **"I walked on the beach alone, and suddenly it felt like everything, everything in the universe was inside of me instead of me being in the universe...At one point that got a little scary. I'm saying, hey, wait a minute, you know, if I get too big here I'm liable to disappear. And as soon as I thought that, of course, then it all narrowed down again."** - Participant 5(21)

There appear to be two general categories of this state of awareness that I have labeled expanded consciousness. In the first category the participants described their consciousness moving out of their body and having a particular location in space in which to "view" their surroundings. In the second category the participants appear to be describing an expansion where their consciousness "fills" the entire expanded space. Instead of their awareness being focused in one "place" it seems to be spread out over a

broad area. Participant 6 described a feeling of her awareness of her self being "spread out" and stated that this awareness lasted for about two days. She reported that the experience of being "spread out" or "expanded" was "eerie" and was accompanied by the disturbing experience of not acting like herself. Finally, it is worthy of note that unlike the previously described states of awareness, this awareness seems to be accompanied by fear. As appears to be indicated in the above quote, fear may inhibit the awareness from occurring. In the following quote the participant seems to be able to allow the awareness to continue by calming herself;

> **"I could feel myself sitting on the chair, but I felt myself leaving through my head, and I felt a real pressure around the crown of my head and I was really frightened, but part of me kept saying, this is really safe."** - Participant 4(13)

10) <u>Vision/Trance:</u>

This last state of awareness is labeled vision/trance because the participants describe an experience where they seem to enter an altered state of consciousness that includes both hearing and seeing things. In their description of this experience some of the participants actually use the term "trance", while others emphasize seeing a "vision." Both the trance and vision states include seeing and/or hearing things that are not usually perceived in an ordinary state of consciousness. The quality of both the "vision" and the "trance" descriptions appeared to overlap to such an extent that I felt it was appropriate to present them under the one label.

The first participant described feeling like she was "possessed" by someone and was somehow living out that person's previous experience. In the first example below, the

participant described feeling "possessed" while she was acting in a play and taking on the bodily sensations of the person who was possessing her;

> **P. "And I went back into the hall where we were putting it on, and it was like I was possessed. I felt a sense of this is not me, this is really not me. (pause) And I don't remember doing it, it was like I did it in a trance",...**
> **I. "And you felt like you kind of went into a trance. What does that feel like."**
> **P. "That I was not there. That I was somebody else, I was a dusty, dirty beggar, and I could practically smell the sweat on my skin and it was a different smell."** - Participant 1(16)

Participant 4 described an experience of being out in the woods alone and entering a trance where she felt like she was "seeing through" the eyes of a native women who had gone through a traumatic event;

> **"...and so I stood in the circle and just was really quiet there and closed my eyes and I began to hear drumming. My feet began to dance, sort of a native kind of dance, and I just allowed all this to happen, and I was, I felt I was surrounded by women and I was crying....I was in trance or something, and about an hour had passed. I'd looked at my clock just before I sat down and I'd been dancing in this circle for this time."** - Participant 4(25)

When asked whether she felt like she was experiencing someone else's experience, participant 4 stated it was perhaps more like her *own* experience from a previous life. The other descriptions of this state of awareness do not include the feeling of being possessed or of a previous life, but instead emphasize seeing a fantastic vision that made a great

impact on them. Participant 4 described being caught in a severe snow storm when all of a sudden she became quite calm and experienced the following vision;

> **"And I felt very peaceful, and I had, like it gets really difficult to describe, but I had a huge angel standing on my right front fender, and he was barefoot and very tall, and very blonde. He had sweeping robes on and he was sweeping, clearing my path...I heard beautiful music and there was a very powerful feeling of peace and that everything was going to be looked after and that I was fine."** - Participant 4(1)

As is the case for many of the experiences that are described, the characteristic quality of the vision appears difficult to put into words. This difficulty is evident in the following quote;

> **I. "So, actually, it was like a visual thing, or more of a sensing of the angels there?"**
> **P. "I can't distinguish the senses on this....It seems the presence was so real and so powerful for me and yet I knew I was conscious that I was driving the car. It was almost as though my senses, at times I've had that experience before, that my senses cross, that I'm able to see with my ears and hear with my eyes, and that sort of sense,"** - Participant 4(4)

Participant 6 described experiencing some dramatic visions that left her feeling confused and questioning whether she was suffering from mental illness. It was not until a much later date that she began to look at her experiences as possibly being part of a spiritual awakening. It is interesting to note that in the following quote participant 6 describes a vision of a biblical figure, King Nebuchadnezer, whom she states she had very little prior knowledge or exposure to;

"And then what I could see was like it was like this golden throne, and it was spinning and spinning, and it was going around and around and around, and I thought, well what is that? And then I thought, it's King Nebuchadnezer...And then that just sort of cleared, and I could see, like, sort of in a mountainous area, and it was, oh, it was beautiful, it was like there were trees everywhere, up and down the mountains. I'm just envisioning what I saw, okay, and it went down into this valley, and it was just these lush green trees, and it was so beautiful."
- Participant 6(19)

Participant 6 also noted that the visions that she experienced were characteristically accompanied by a loud sound, which she described as a "roar." Perhaps the most dramatic example of all the recorded experiences is the following one by participant 6 who recounted being "visited" by Jesus;

P. "I surrendered, I'd done it all, and I was just laying on my bed and I just felt just really distraught. And he just appeared in my room, he was just there, it was a very real presence."
I. "You could see him ? You could see it was an actual person, with a face, and everything, and he spoke to you."
P. "...definitely, ...yeah, I could see him. Yeah, he just came and sat beside me on the bed, and I was laying on my stomach, and he just patted me on the back and said, there, there, child, and it was just a real comforting presence..." - Participant 6(25)

Finally, although many of the descriptions of this state, vision/trance, appear to be uplifting and generally satisfying, the following quotes reveal the confusion and distress that can be associated with experiencing such unusual and unfamiliar states of awareness;

"I was really doubting what I was experiencing, and yet it was such a powerful experience, like my conscious mind, or my ego, I guess, my self, was saying, yeah sure, you know, there was a lot of doubt for me, but I know that I experienced this. It was very, very strong." - Participant 4(8)

"I mean, again, it was okay when it was happening. It was later when you sort of try to rationalize it and your thinking process kicks in and you go, Oh my God, now what, how do I do this. Like what ever this is, I wanted it to stop, because there had been a period of months where a lot of this stuff was going on." - Participant 6(23)

Synthesis: Unity Consciousness

As stated previously, the purpose of this section is to combine the descriptions of the ten states of awareness into a composite state that we can speculatively describe as a "unity state of consciousness." Remember, this process of combining the states to create a picture of unity consciousness is simply a conceptual exercise. If we are to hypothesize that each of the described states of awareness, is in a sense, a subset of this more complete state of consciousness, then combining the descriptions together should give us an impression of the "larger picture" of unitive consciousness. This hypothesis would be in line with Wilber's (1976, 1996) model of consciousness as described in chapter one.

The description of unity consciousness provided below is a composite that was created by combining the actual phenomenological descriptions of each of the ten states of awareness described by the participants.

Unity Consciousness:

In a state of unity consciousness one perceives the universe as overwhelmingly beautiful. Associated with this awe inspiring perception of beauty is a deeply sensed meaning or "knowing" that there is a grand purpose for each and everything. The details of a design, the curve of a tree branch, and the colors of a sunset are exquisitely appreciated and are experienced as having a profound significance.

The boundaries of self seem to expand outwards and the sense of individual awareness and identity is lost to an awareness and identification with literally everything.

In this boundaryless state one is free from the constraints of time and place and may come in contact with, what might be described as, "spiritual beings." In addition, accompanying this expanded state of consciousness is an exhilarating experience of intense energy and one's surroundings appear to be infused with a bright, soothing white light.

Finally, central to the experience of unitive consciousness is an overwhelmingly powerful feeling of love that seems to pervade the universe. Love is experienced as an intelligence, a presence, and a light that one is both filled with and surrounded by.

The Impact

Although the primary focus of the present study was the immediate experiential description of the participants' spiritual experiences, in this section I examine a secondary interest; the reported impact that the experiences have had on the participants' lives. Each of the participants were interviewed for approximately two hours. In the last fifteen minutes, or so, of the interview the focus was turned away from the immediate experiences themselves to the impact or influence that the experiences may have had on the participants' lives. Granted, the question of the impact of these experiences warrants a study in itself and my treatment of this issue is necessarily brief and superficial. The purpose of asking this secondary question was to get a general idea of how the experiences were later interpreted by the participants and how they may have been acted upon. The issue of how the experiences "translate" into belief and action is examined in the Discussion Chapter (Chapter Six). In the following analysis, I first examine what each

of the participants reported about the impact of the experiences and then I summarize by providing a description of the general themes that emerged.

Participant 1: Participant 1 stated that her first reported experience, feeling surrounded by a white light while praying in a chapel, left her with a curiosity that kept her seeking and reflecting on the "big issues" of life. It gave her permission to ask what the significance of her life might be and, in her own words, she stated "I felt called to do something with my life, and so I was seeking to find out what that was going to be." She also became very seriously involved with the church and its teachings and, at times, was concerned that her experience with the church would somehow invalidate or distract her from her personal spiritual experiences.

Participant 1 also reported that the memory of her spiritual experiences is very precious to her and she has been careful not to share them with people who might invalidate them. She stated that her spiritual experiences have awakened a creative side of her personality and she views her creativity hand-in-hand with her spirituality. The link between her spirituality and her creativity seems to have come from experiencing spiritual imagery that inspired her to be creative. This spiritually-inspired creativity encouraged her to take on a career in writing and self expression.

Finally, Participant 1 stated that her spiritual experiences have left her with a "rootedness" and a firmer sense of herself. This firmer sense of herself provides her with emotional stability and an acceptance of what life has to offer her. In her own words: "But underneath, if I were to talk about the undercurrents in my life, it is one of great stability

and strength and a sense of myself, and so psychologically I feel, underneath, very rooted."

Participant 2: Participant 2 stated that her spiritual experiences have had a very significant impact on her, but she doesn't think about them as often as she would like to. She also stated that the experiences helped her "get out of her head" and appreciate that some things are beyond logical reasoning. In reflecting on the experiences she stated; "Because if there was anything that I was really powerfully aware of , was that this was something I would not be able to figure out."

Participant 2 noted that she has "absolute trust" in the experiences, in the sense that she doesn't question the genuineness or importance of the experiences. She stated that the experiences have left her with a powerful sense that there is "something beyond" and that underneath the world of appearances there is an importance to everything. Participant 2 also stated that the experiences left her with the belief that she is part of some great "universal process" and that this realization can be very comforting. In her own words;

> "I rarely feel separate, I rarely feel really alone, because I feel I'm part of this greater something, and I don't always know how to live that, and I think maybe one of the ways I've come to realize I need to live that is to, like if I am going through a really bad time, to accept that really bad time as part of the process."

This same participant also stated that feeling part of something much greater than herself, in her words; "part of something awesome", gave her life meaning and let her rise above the mundane aspects of her life.

Participant 3: Participant 3 stated that his spiritual experiences have acted as a "touchstone" for the rest of his life and guided him when making important and difficult choices. He states;

> "I can sort of measure things against some of the perceptions I had in those moments, and see if I'm straying really far from where I like to be...remembering that what's ultimately important for me is some of these values that I...that came out of some of these experiences."

The specific values that he reported were associated with the experiences are; an appreciation and concern for the natural environment, an overall concern for the well being of the planet, and a commitment to service and compassion towards others.

Participant 3 went on to describe how his core values; compassion towards others and a concern for the environment and the future of the planet, came both from the influence of the experiences themselves and his involvement with organized religion and the study of theology. When asked to try and identify what it was about the *experiences* that led to those specific values, he stated; "There is sort of this emotional element inherent in it. It just seems to want to flow outward...I guess the best word if we used it carefully, would be love." In appears that those brief moments that he describes as spiritual experiences, left him with an intense appreciation, or what might be described as

an overwhelming feeling of love, for both his surroundings and for others. For this participant that feeling of love has inspired him towards action, towards applying the values in service to the planet and to humanity. Finally, he added that the experiences left him with a sense of the preciousness of life and the importance of not wasting our time here.

Participant 4 : Participant 4 viewed her spiritual experiences as part of a "transformational process." She described the process as contributing to the development of a deeper sense of self and an awareness that she is being guided and supported through her life. She also stated that her experiences have left her feeling more compassionate and less judgmental of others. In addition to these positive elements of the process, participant 4 also described her transformational process as being extremely painful and disorienting at times. She reported that her spiritual experiences have been closely linked with her own personal growth and that pain and suffering have been very central to this growth process.

Participant 4 also reported that she views her spiritual process as part of a "Kundalini awakening", where energy is experienced moving through her body and bringing with it experiences both of bliss and physical suffering. She stated that it was only after she had been experiencing numerous episodes of physical pain that she considered that she might be going through a transformational process. She described her experiences of physical and emotional suffering as contributing to the development of a personal philosophy of living in the present moment as much as possible.

Participant 5: Participant 5 described a very ambivalent attitude towards the extensive history she has had with spiritual experiences. On the one hand, she has engaged herself in a life that is intensely focused on the "spirit", as the leader of a spiritual Centre, and on the other, she wonders whether the immense emotional and physical struggle along the way has been worth it. She described feeling as if the spiritual experiences were part of a process and that she is destined to complete some "spiritual work" but is unsure what exactly that work should be. Since she first began having spiritual experiences, participant 5 has been intensely involved with activities related to the spiritual life. She began going to workshops, reading books, and eventually established a spiritual Centre where she facilitates weekly meeting of prayer, meditation and discussion. Her spiritual experiences have radically transformed her view of "reality" and she shares her new "reality" with others on an ongoing basis.

Participant 5 also reported that she believes that she has been going through a transformational process that is part of an evolutionary shift. This transformational process is described as a Kundalini awakening and participant 4 and 6 also believe that their experiences fit within this context. These three participants seemed to have been grateful that through the years they were exposed to information that described the Kundalini experience. Viewing their experiences in the context of a Kundalini awakening seems to have given them a framework to make some sense of their unusual and profoundly disorienting experiences.

Participant 6: Participant 6 stated that her spiritual experiences have left her with a sense of awe and a deep appreciation for life. In her own words; "...all life is precious, and it's a gift, and every breath you take is a gift." In addition to appreciating life she described sensing profound meaning;

> "Because I have such a deeper sense of what it all means, and although I'm not consciously aware of what everything means, I have a deeper sense of some profound meaning and purpose in my life and in other people's lives."

She stated that her experiences also left her with a "knowing" that there is a God. She describes knowing as different from believing because "knowing is like every cell in your body knows this is true." She went on to describe God as being "in" each and every one of us and "in" everything." The experience that God is everywhere and in each of us, led her to the belief that we have a commitment and an obligation to each other and to ourselves. In other words, it appears that her experience that God is part of us and of everything, has left her with a sense of compassion and responsibility towards herself and others.

Finally, she described an intense fear associated with her experiences. She described her experience of fear as both keeping her "grounded" and as contributing to a lot of resistance and stress. According to her, the fear may have slowed down the unfolding process, which may have been helpful, but it may also have contributed to the intense psychological and physical distress associated with the experiences.

Impact Themes

There were clearly some similarities, or themes, in the reports of how the spiritual experiences impacted the participants' lives. The impact theme that was most commonly reported by the participants was a belief that there is "something beyond" the world of physical appearances, something much greater and more profound than they could even imagine. This awareness contributed to the participants seeking some further understanding of the "something beyond" and involving themselves in spiritual growth work and religious practices. The experiences left them with a curiosity about spiritual issues and often initiated a journey of seeking out answers to the "big questions" in life.

Another impact theme had to do with feeling connected or part of "something much larger" than themselves. The participants described that feeling part of everything, "one with everything" , left them with a sense of compassion and love. This powerful feeling of love and compassion seems to have led to a sense of responsibility to serve others and to take care of the planet itself. The participants appear to be describing a shift in identity where their concern moves beyond the boundary of a "small self" to include a more universal or shared identity.

A few of the participants related that their spiritual experiences impressed them with an appreciation or reverence for life in general and for their surroundings. The participants reported that after having their experiences they were more attuned to the beauty in others and in the environment. This experience of appreciation, or what was described by some as awe, was frequently reported as contributing to a belief that life is precious and should be lived to its fullest.

Three of the participants reported that the experiences contributed to feelings of disorientation and distress. There appeared to be a great amount of fear associated with the unfamiliarity of the experiences and some severe anxiety concerning the possibility that the experiences were a result of mental instability. The same three participants placed their experiences in the context of the process of "Kundalini awakening" and interpreted the bliss and pain of energy in the body as part of this process.

Finally, a few of the participants interpreted their experiences as a "calling" to do something with their lives. However, the "something" that they were supposed to do was not necessarily clear for them and this uncertainty seems also to have contributed to some confusion and distress.

Validity Check Results

As described in the chapter on methodology, part of the research process was to return to the participants with the results after the transcripts were analyzed. I presented all of the participants with copies of the analysis of their own transcript and copies of the results of the ten generalized descriptions. All six of the participants stated that the analysis and generalized descriptions "fit" with their personal experiences. There were some very minor changes in wording which were subsequently added to the results.

Three of the six participants stated that they had experienced more states of awareness than they had described in the interview. Upon reading the generalized descriptions they stated that one or two of the states that they had not described were

familiar to them but they had either forgotten or had run out of time before they could relate those experiences.

Two of the participants stated that in their own experience, fear and disorientation were very much a part of the process of spiritual growth. One of the participants stated that if she had a choice she would be unsure whether she would ever again choose the spiritual "process" that she underwent. Both of these participants added that the fear and disorientation seemed to be "by-products" of the process and not really part of the "spiritual experiences" themselves.

Chapter Six

Discussion

The structure of this final chapter is built around the three questions that were presented in the introductory chapter. The first question was; What is the immediate, or pre-reflective, experience of spirituality? Of the three questions that were formulated, this question really addresses the central focus of the present study, which is a phenomenological analysis of spiritual experience. The answer to this question was essentially provided in the previous Results chapter, in which I presented an interpretive analysis of the various "states of awareness." However, in this final chapter I would like to add some comments concerning this analysis and compare the results to the literature that was reviewed in chapter two.

The second question that I discuss in this chapter focuses on the reflective level, or the *impact*, that the spiritual experiences had on the participants. In this section of the chapter I discuss how Transpersonal psychology has approached the study of spiritual experience. The third, and final, question addressed in this chapter does not remain as closely tied to the phenomenological method of study. This final question considers the conceptual issues related to spiritual experience and compares the obtained results with Wilber's (1980) model of an evolving consciousness. However, before I move on to address these questions I would like comment on two important issues that surfaced in the process of the study, that of delimiting the study and a paradoxical issue within the study.

Delimiting the Study

First of all, I would like to return to an issue that was previously discussed in chapter four. This issue relates to the unexpected finding that the term "spiritual experience" appears to refer to a broad category of experiences that are more loosely associated than I had assumed prior to interviewing the participants. Instead of the present study being a study of "spiritual experience" it turns out that it would be more accurately described as a study of "*spiritual experiences.*"

Phenomenological studies of immediate experience usually focus on an experience that is relatively narrowly defined, or homogeneously conceptualized. For instance, Stevick's (1971) classic analysis of anger, reveals that the experience of anger is made up of a number of clearly identified themes that may be synthesized into a composite "picture" of the overall experience. Each of the themes can be clearly conceptualized as a "part" of the overall experience of anger. However, when it comes to the study of spiritual experience, the participants' descriptions reveal that there are a number of "sub-categories" of experience *under* the general heading , "spiritual experience."

To further clarify this issue let me provide examples drawn directly from the results. As was presented in the previous chapter, the participants reported ten relatively discrete states of awareness as examples of their spiritual experiences. Examples of these states of awareness include: an overwhelming feeling of love, an experience of moving out of one's body, and a trance state where a vision is encountered. I would argue that these reports of experience are *sufficiently different*, one from the other, so as to conclude that there are numerous "categories" of experience under the general heading "spiritual." Just

as there are numerous categories of emotional experience, like anger, sadness, and joy, there appear to be numerous categories of spiritual experience. The present study provides a phenomenological interpretation of a *selection* of these categories of spiritual experience.

I use the term *selection* above because I am not suggesting that the participants' interview data provides us with an "exhaustive" list of the categories of experiences that may be considered spiritual. If there were perhaps more participants interviewed for the study, or a different sample of participants, I am certain that additional experiences would have been identified. The sample that was chosen limits the focus to spontaneously occurring, unusual states of awareness that the participants referred to as spiritual experiences. Now that I have "delimited" what the results of the study can theoretically reveal to us, let me turn to an interesting paradoxical issue related to the study of spiritual experience.

A Paradoxical Issue Within Spirituality

There appears to be an inherent paradox that surfaces in the attempt to study spiritual experiences. Knowledge from spiritual or transcendent experiences suggest that there is a "oneness" or underlying unification in the universe. From this perspective, the boundaries or distinctions we usually make between things are seen as artificial and arbitrary fabrications. However, as soon as we begin discussing spirituality we delineate what it "is" and what it "is not."

The very process of carrying out a phenomenological analysis is an attempt to separate, or make distinct, each of the various parts of an experience. Also, there is an attempt to distinguish the experience in question from other experiences. This exercise of dissecting our experience and setting boundaries between the parts is clearly contradictory to the knowledge that comes from spiritual experience on the "oneness", or interconnectedness of things. The paradox comes into view when we realize that, with our present logic and language, it seems that the only way we can effectively communicate our experience is to split it up into parts separate from the whole.

The above argument begs the following question: Why try and communicate our experience if the resulting description ends up fragmenting and distorting the "actuality" of the experience? This discussion has a long history within the Eastern philosophical traditions, and might be summed up this way: if you are talking about "it" then you can be sure you are not talking about "it." To resolve this paradoxical problem for now, (and to avoid disqualifying the results of the whole study!), I would argue that the value of communicating our experience, however imperfect that communication is, outweighs the negative repercussions that come from dissecting, and thereby potentially distorting, our experience. Now that I have dealt with the above issues I turn to a discussion of the lived experience of spirituality.

The Lived Experience of Spirituality

In answer to the first question, What is the immediate, or pre-reflective, experience of spirituality?, the study revealed that ten relatively discrete sub-categories of experience,

or states of awareness, were characteristically reported. I decided to refer to these sub-categories as "states of awareness" because, compared to our normal waking consciousness, each category seemed to represent an unusual state of consciousness that had identifiable characteristics. I settled on the term "state of awareness", instead of "state of consciousness", because many of the reported experiences were not depicted as completely altered states of consciousness but rather shifts in perspective or heightened, more intense versions of normal waking consciousness. The label attached to each identified state, such as "Love," refers to the predominant theme described by the participants in their report of the experience. Following is a list of the ten identified states of awareness.

1) Beauty/Awe
2) Harmony
3) Light
4) Connectedness
5) Love
6) Energy
7) Presence of Other
8) Guiding Intuition
9) Expanded Consciousness
10) Vision/Trance

It is important to note that only one of the states presented above, "Presence of Other", was described by all of the participants. The other states were described by various subsets of the total sample of six participants. The state identified as "Connectedness" was described by five of the participants, while the state "Guiding Intuition" was only described by two of the six participants. Again, the fact that a state

was only described by a subset of the total sample does not in any way invalidate that state as a legitimate example of a spiritual experience. Being described by a smaller subset of the total sample may simply suggest that the described state is a *less commonly* encountered example of spiritual experience.

The states of awareness listed above are organized in a particular order so that each subsequent state in the list represents a more dramatically altered state of awareness. In other words, the first state in the list, Beauty/Awe, appears to be more qualitatively similar to normal waking consciousness than the last state in the list, Vision/Trance. In fact, the first eight states on the list can be seen as having counterparts in our ordinary state of consciousness. In our ordinary state of consciousness, for instance, we may experience the beauty of a sunrise and have a sense that all is right with the world. The difference with these reported spiritual experiences is more a matter of degree, where the intensity is dramatically increased over our ordinary state of consciousness, so that one may have an overwhelming experience of the "exquisite beauty" of a sunrise or a profound insight that there is harmony in the entire universe. In contrast, the last two states in the list above seem to be unlike any experience that is ever encountered in ordinary consciousness. These states, Expanded Consciousness, and Vision/Trance, appear to be more significantly, and dramatically "altered" states of consciousness.

When comparing the participants' reports of their spiritual experiences with the various reports of non-ordinary, or transpersonal, states of consciousness found in the literature, there appears to be a striking similarity in the quality and content of these reports. In fact, all of the reports that I have come across in the literature and through first

hand contact, have a very identifiable and familiar character to them. However, the descriptions of the spiritual experiences of the participants in the present study tended to be somewhat milder versions of the experiences described by individuals who had used drugs or other methods to induce a non-ordinary state of consciousness. As a general statement, all of these altered state experiences appear to be on a continuum of intensity and the spontaneously occurring experiences described in the present study seem to be located on the lower end of that continuum.

The quality of the first five states are similar to each other and may even be considered a sub-category of their own. These five states all seem to involve the participants' *perception* of the world and their *relationship* to that world. The perception of the world described in these states is overwhelmingly positive and, accompanying this "rose colored" perception, is an acceptance of self and a feeling of "belongingness." The perception that was consistently described depicted a harmonious, beautiful, interconnected world, in which the participants felt loved and meaningfully involved.

There was much "overlap" between the first five states. For example, in the state of awareness where light was perceived, the participants occasionally used the word love interchangeably. The light was experienced as love, and love experienced as light. Not only was there evidence that the states were overlapping, but frequently, two or more states of awareness were experienced concurrently. One might argue that since the states were reported concurrently and there was overlap between them, that they should be viewed as one state with various themes. However, many of the participants' reports of these states provided examples of relatively discrete, or "pure" states of awareness, where

there was no evidence of overlap with other states. For example, occasionally participants reported an experience that included three or four of the states, such as Love, Harmony, and Connectedness, in one experience. However, there were also reports where Love was described without there being an accompanying awareness of Harmony or Connectedness. Therefore, although the states were seen in combination with each other, they also seem to be able to "stand on their own" as discrete categories. In the discussion below, I examine each of these states in light of the literature that was reviewed in chapter two.

The first state of awareness, which is labeled Beauty/Awe, is referred to by William James (1901) as one of the most common themes in records of religious experience. James describes this "perception of beauty" experience as part of the "faith or assurance state", which is included as one of three general characteristics that he associates with a "conversion experience."

In addition to this appreciation of beauty, James describes the "faith or assurance state" as "the loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer condition should remain the same" (p.198). This description by James effectively captures what I have labeled in the present study as the second state of awareness, that of "Harmony."

In his essay "This Is It", Watts (1988) emphasizes this state of awareness of Harmony as the most striking theme of reported spiritual experiences. He suggests that accompanying the profound awareness that "all is right with the world" is the:

> ...conviction, or insight, that the immediate *now*, whatever its nature, is the goal and fulfillment of all living. Surrounding and flowing from this insight is an

> emotional ecstasy, a sense of intense relief, freedom and lightness, and often of almost unbearable love for the world, which is, however, secondary. Often, the pleasure of the experience is confused with the experience and the insight lost in the ecstasy, so that in trying to retain the secondary effects of the experience the individual misses its point - that the immediate now is complete even when it is not ecstatic. For ecstasy is a necessarily impermanent contrast in the constant fluctuation of our feelings. But insight, when clear enough, persists; having once understood a particular skill, the facility tends to remain. (p.28)

So it appears that Watts takes the lived experience of Harmony and interprets it one step further, arguing that this perception of the world is valid in itself and reveals to the experiencer that the eternal moment, *now*, whether it be of pain or pleasure, is completely "right" and just as it should be. Note how in the above quote, Watts states that the emotion, love, is *secondary* to the insight of the immediate "now" as complete. He seems to be suggesting that the other states of awareness are *byproducts* of the intellectual component inherent in spiritual experience. Whether or not the intellectual insight is "the point" of the experience, it is clear that many of the participants in the present study reported an awareness that coincides with the insight described by Watts. The following quote comes from participant three:

> ...again I had this moment of a real strong faith, in my life, a strong faith in the world and in the universe, this sense that I really belonged, you know, I really belonged here, that life really mattered and that I could just trust that things would be okay.

It's interesting to see the connection here between the feeling of "trust that things would be okay", which I have identified as an example of the Harmony state, and the use of the term "faith." The deep spiritual insight into the harmony and "rightness" of the world may be later *translated* into the religious concept of faith, or belief in God's master plan. In fact, I am sure that an expert on religious symbolism would find that the ten states identified here as *lived* spiritual experience provide the foundation for much of the imagery and narrative that make up the world's various religions.

The third characteristic state of awareness, that of Light, is classically associated with spiritual experiences. Stories from the Bible of the heavens opening up, or the halos surrounding spiritual figures, repeatedly refer to this quality of "divine light." Kason (1994) associates light experiences with Kundalini awakening and goes so far as to state that observers occasionally report that the experiencer's face seems to radiate with an inner light.

The fourth state of awareness, that of Connectedness, is interesting in that the perception appears to be in agreement with current scientific evidence on the nature of the universe. In his book "The Tao of Physics", Fritjof Capra (1991) discusses how modern physics is uncovering the relative interconnectedness of all aspects of the universe. Wilber's (1996) discussion of "holons" is also relevant here, in that every "thing" in the universe is seen as part of something else. However, unlike the scientific conceptualization of the connectedness of things, the participants seem to actually have an immediate experience of connectedness. Note the following quote by participant four;

> Well, there didn't seem to be a separation between me or the tree or nature, like my boundaries weren't there. I could float into the tree and the tree could float into me, there didn't seem to be any barrier.

The fifth identified state of awareness was Love. Whereas Watts concluded that the Harmony awareness, and accompanying "eternal moment" insight, were the core components of spiritual experience, I would suggest that the state of awareness that I have identified as Love stands out as the central characteristic, or quality, of spiritual experience. In fact, the first seven states, Beauty/Awe, Harmony, Light, Connectedness, Love, Energy, and Presence of Other, all seem to relate in some way to an experience of love. The word "love" was used repeatedly in describing these various states and, as was noted previously, "love" was often used interchangeably with other terms. For instance, Light, Connectedness, Energy, and Presence of Other, could all be interpreted as examples of an experience of *giving* or *receiving* love. One could also interpret Beauty/Awe and Harmony, as qualities of perception related to a *loving* relationship with one's surroundings. If I read between the lines, the core quality of love seems to be apparent in the following quote, which had been labeled Beauty/Awe in the analysis;

> ...and there was a sense of, kind of almost like looking up at the universe and feeling for a moment that what a beautiful place this is, what a wonderful place this is, and not just where I was standing but just this universe is so incredible...

In the above quote the participant emphasizes the experience of perceiving beauty, but a *loving* connection with his surroundings also comes through in the description. This overlap of the characteristic qualities within spiritual experience is a reflection of the

inherent paradox of dissecting the experience into its parts, which I discussed at the outset of the chapter.

The sixth identified state of awareness, Energy, was also quite common to the various reported experiences and appears to be the characteristic *bodily* response to spiritual experience. All of the participants' reported experiences seemed to have an intense, energizing quality to them. Grof (1988) notes that the movement of intense energy in the body during spiritual experiences is incompatible with the Western medical model. This incompatibility is due to the fact that this kind of movement of energy does not appear to correspond with known anatomical structures or physiological processes. According to Grof, the movement of energy is not occurring in the physical, or gross material realm, but instead is a phenomenon that occurs on the spiritual, or what has been described in the Eastern esoteric traditions, as the "subtle body" realm.

The participants' most dramatic examples of energy moving in the body correspond quite closely with the descriptions of the Kundalini phenomenon provided in the literature. As I previously stated in the literature review chapter, Kundalini refers to an activation of energy in the body that rises up from the base of the spine and leads to the opening, or "lighting up", of the body's psychic centers, or *chakras*. Grof (1990) reports that the movement of energy associated with Kundalini awakenings can be initiated by intense meditation, an interaction with an advanced spiritual teacher, specific yoga techniques, childbirth, intense lovemaking, and, occasionally, spontaneously without any obvious triggers.

The two participants who reported numerous energy, or Kundalini like, experiences also emphasized the disruptive effects associated with these experiences. Grof (1990) reports that his extensive examination of the manifestations of Kundalini awakenings reveals that the process, although sometimes very disorienting and distressful, is essentially healing. Participant five, however, was uncertain whether, given the chance, she would relive the painful process that was a constant concern for most of her adult life. One thing seems certain, these intense energy experiences, and their disruptive effects on the body, reveal a "darker" side to the transformative path of spiritual experience. Instead of benign encounters with "bliss and light", the intense Kundalini experience seems to be capable of initiating a nightmarish psycho-physiological journey that most would likely decline if given the opportunity.

The seventh state of awareness, Presence of Other, was described by the participants' at varying levels of intensity. Some of the reports suggested that the presence of a person, or spiritual being, was subtly and minimally perceived, while two of the participants stated that the presence was actually visible and very "real" to them. The public opinion poll (Reid, 1996) referred to earlier, found that fifty three percent of a sample of 1500 Canadians answered affirmatively to the question "Have you ever, as an adult, had the feeling that you were somehow in the presence of God?" Considering that this sample is supposedly representative of the Canadian population in general, it would appear that this kind of experience is surprisingly common.

From his extensive analysis of first-hand accounts of religious experience, James (1902) concluded that religious experience is most often characterized by a sense of an unseen reality, or consciousness of a higher power:

> It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there", more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses" by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed. (p.61)

This awareness of the presence of some sort of "entity" is especially interesting in terms of how this kind of experience may be "translated" into religious language or doctrine. I will return to this issue below, when I address the reflective level of spiritual experience.

The eighth state of awareness was labeled "Guiding Intuition." This state was only sparsely described by two of the six participants and, therefore, it is difficult to say much about this awareness. However, the awareness appears to "stand on its own", in the respect that it does not seem to be simply an aspect of one of the other states. Grof (1990) includes "Communication with Spirit Guides and Channeling" as a discrete category of transpersonal experience and characterizes the experience as an encounter with an "entity that appears to be entirely separate from and independent of one's own inner process" (p.93). The entities are described by Grof as being suprahuman, or deities, inhabiting higher planes of consciousness and endowed with extraordinary wisdom. Channeling refers to a process where the individual becomes a mediator, or channel, for messages that come from a source allegedly outside of his or her individual consciousness.

The two participants who described the "Guiding Intuition" awareness both referred to it as a communication that was "received" from an inner voice which was not their own. It is possible that the Guiding Intuition awareness is a *milder* version of the more dramatic "spiritual guide" communication that is identified by Grof. The "spiritual guide" transpersonal experience described by Grof refers to a phenomenon that occurs when an individual enters an altered, trance state of consciousness. The state of consciousness that the participants in the present study described was perhaps a "light trance" that enabled them to communicate with entities on the spiritual level. If this were the case, then this would be another example of how the identified states are experienced on a continuum that moves from mild to more intensely and deeply altered states of consciousness.

The ninth state of awareness was labeled "Expanded Consciousness." In comparison to the first seven identified states, the ninth and tenth states are clearly more striking examples of altered or non-ordinary states of consciousness. As reported in the Results chapter, there appear to be two general categories of the Expanded Consciousness state. In the first category the participants described their consciousness moving out of their body and having a particular location in space. From this location they could "view" their surroundings and observe their own body from a distance. In the second category, the participants appear to be describing an expansion in which their consciousness "fills" the entire expanded space. The first category is the one that has been given the label "out-of-body-experience" (OOBE) and has been studied as an ESP phenomenon. The out-of-body-experience is also quite similar to the "Near Death" experience, which has been

researched quite extensively. Research on Near Death Experiences (NDE's), have consistently found that clinically dead people can have out-of-body-experiences, during which they can accurately witness resuscitation procedures from a location outside their body, or events that are occurring in remote locations (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1984; Sabom, 1982).

The second category of Expanded Consciousness described by the participants, where their consciousness "fills" the expanded space, is also an example of how there can be various levels, or intensities, of the experience. The expansion can seemingly "move" outwards from the individual to become more and more inclusive of one's surroundings. It appears that in these examples the experience of consciousness becomes *disembodied* and consciousness pervades the entire space or environment. Grof (1988) provides descriptions of experiences where there appears to be an expansion of consciousness to both "planetary" and "entire physical universe" identification. The following quote is from a participant in one of Grof's holotropic breathing workshops who experienced a "planetary consciousness" experience;

> The experience of being the Great Mother Goddess, Mother Earth, then changed into actually becoming the planet Earth. There was no question that I - the Earth - was a living organism, an intelligent being trying to understand myself, struggling to evolve to a higher level of awareness, and attempting to communicate with other cosmic beings.
>
> The metals and minerals constituting the planet were my bones, my skeleton. The biosphere - the plant life, animals, and humans - were my flesh. I

> experienced within myself the circulation of water from the ocean to the clouds and from there into little creeks and large rivers and back into the sea. The water system was my blood and the meteorological changes - the evaporation, air currents, the rainfall, and the snow insured its circulation, transport of nourishment and cleansing. The communication between plants, animals, and humans, including modern technology - the press, telephone, radio, and television, and the computer network - was my nervous system, my brain. (p.67)

Although none of the participants in the present study reported such a detailed description of the expanded consciousness state, participant five did report the following awareness;

> I walked on the beach alone, and suddenly it felt like everything, everything in the universe was inside of me instead of me being in the universe...At one point that got a little scary. I'm saying, hey, wait a minute, you know, if I get too big here I'm liable to disappear. And as soon as I thought that, of course, then it all narrowed down again.

So it appears that the experiencer's intention influences the intensity of the experience and fear seems to have the effect of returning one's consciousness to its "ordinary" state.

The tenth state of awareness was labeled Vision/Trance. In all honesty, I was baffled and somewhat skeptical when three of the six participants in the study began to describe these vision experiences. The reports of having an angel on the hood of the car and seeing Jesus himself at the foot of the bed, pushed the limits of my openness towards

the credibility of these experiences. However, the literature provides further corroboration that these mystical vision experiences are being reported by numerous individuals (Grof, 1988; Kason, 1994). Not only are these experiences more common than you might expect, but the content of the reported visions are remarkably similar to each other. Kason (1994) reports that she frequently comes across individuals who report mystical visions of saints and deities. She states that the visions seem to cross religious and cultural boundaries. Christians report visions of the Buddha, while a yogi can have one of St. Francis. Grof (1988) suggests that encounters with guides, teachers, and protectors from the spirit world belong to the most valuable and rewarding phenomena of the transpersonal domain.

The vision/trance awareness suggests that the individual has entered a realm or plane of consciousness that is quite radically different from our ordinary conscious experience. Participant six described her encounter with Jesus as being very "real" and tangible, while the other reports seemed to suggest that the quality of the vision was more "dream-like." The reports provided by the participants indicate that the vision experience is generally a positive, inspiring occurrence. However, trying to "make sense" or orient oneself to the personal meaning of these dramatic experiences can be difficult and distressing for the experiencer. Making sense of the experience belongs to the reflective level, which I turn to now.

The Reflective Level of Spiritual Experience

In this section I examine the "impact", or reflective level, of the reported spiritual experiences and discuss how the field of Transpersonal psychology has utilized these

experiences towards a therapeutic end. In using the term "reflective" I am referring to how the experiencer interprets and acts on spiritual experience *after* the experience occurs. You might conceptualize the "reflective level" of the experience as what transpires for the individual once the immediate experience has passed. Of course drawing the line between when the immediate experience has *ended* and the *reflection* on that experience begins, is necessarily an arbitrary decision. Even with very brief experiences, the reflection, or interpretation of that experience, can occur almost immediately. Trying to accurately assess whether an insight was actually experienced during the immediate experience or interpreted later is very difficult to determine. Conceding these points, let me move on to a discussion of how these brief spiritual experiences informed the participants' views of themselves and the world around them.

In answer to the second question posed in the introduction, What is the reflective level of spirituality?, the themes that were reported in the results chapter revealed that generally the participants were left with an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. The experiencer seems to *see through* the mundaneness of everyday life to a deeper more purposeful existence. The reflective themes of there being "something beyond" the appearances of our everyday world and the feeling of being connected to "something much larger" than oneself, provided the participants with a sense of stability in their lives. Being connected to others and the planet also contributed to a powerful feeling of love and compassion that appears to lead to a sense of responsibility to serve others and to take care of the planet itself. As stated earlier, the experiences seem to lead to a shift in the experiencer's identity such that their concern moves beyond the boundary of a "small self"

to include a more universal or shared identity. He or she is thus motivated to take care of others and to attend to the environment as an extension of themselves.

One issue that is relevant here concerns the question of how the immediate experience is *translated* into a shared language and acted upon. It was previously noted that the participants had difficulty putting the experience into words. They had trouble *capturing* the experience in language and occasionally stated that it was impossible to accurately describe their experience. You can imagine that since it is difficult to put words to the experience, people are likely to rely on the language and meaning attributed to these experiences provided by traditional religions. In this way the experiencers are likely to interpret their unique experience in the language and rhetoric supplied by the religion that they have had the most exposure to.

In clarifying the above argument let me provide an example from the reports of experience provided by the participants. There were numerous examples of the Presence of Other state of awareness. Some of the examples referred to the presence as being that of God, while others simply stated that there was a "holy" presence, or presence of an "intelligent being." In a culture where we are saturated with stories of the reality of a God it seems quite likely that having an experience of an intense presence would quite naturally be interpreted as the presence of God. So, in other words, the interpretation applied to the experiences is heavily dependent on the shared language of one's religion and general culture.

The impact of spiritual experience is what Elkins (1988) refers to as the "fruits of spirituality." If we were to judge the experience by its fruits it would appear that the

results are generally very positive. The experiencer is left with a deeper, more "rooted" sense of self and a more compassionate attitude towards others and the environment. However, as one of the participants expressly communicated, there is also a disruptive and disorienting component to spiritual experience which should not be overlooked. Three of the participants reported that they encountered severe physiological reactions as part of their "spiritual awakening." In addition, it appears that the process of incorporating new and profound insights about "reality" can prove to be psychologically challenging. This seems to be especially relevant when it comes to adjusting to the shift in sense of self, or identity, which accompanies spiritual experience.

Another source of distress associated with adjustment to these unusual experiences comes from the cultural attitude toward "nonordinary" experience. Generally, our Western cultural view of nonordinary states of consciousness is that of skepticism and, in some cases, outright disdain. As Wilber (1996) argues, the Western worldview, under the persuasive influence of the natural science model, has increasingly tended to repress the transcendent dimension of human experience.

Another reason that these unusual spiritual experiences may be collectively repressed is simply due to fear of the unknown. The history of Western psychology reflects a fear of the "abnormal", where beliefs or behaviors that fall outside the normal curve are treated as suspiciously pathological. Fear of "insanity" appears to be deeply rooted in both the culture and the profession of mainstream psychology itself. However, the field of transpersonal psychology, which emerged in the early 1960s, has made a significant effort to legitimize the study of unusual states of consciousness. In the next

section I would like to discuss the general approach that transpersonal psychology has taken towards these experiences.

Transpersonal Psychology and Spiritual Experience

Transpersonal psychology grew out of a concern that psychological inquiry should include the study of optimal psychological health and well-being (Walsh & Vaughn, 1980). Although the term transpersonal psychology originated in the 1960's, the subject matter of this approach has a long history within Eastern philosophical traditions. Central to both Eastern philosophies and the transpersonal approach is the belief that altered states of consciousness are significant human experiences that can tell us much about our psychological nature. In the words of Ram Dass (1978), an eloquent Western spokesperson of the Eastern philosophies:

> We grow up with one plane of existence we call real. We identify totally with that reality as absolute, and we discount experiences that are inconsistent with it...What Einstein demonstrated in physics is equally true of all other aspects of the cosmos, all reality is relative. Each reality is true only within certain limits. It is only one possible version of the way things are, there are always multiple versions of reality. To awaken from any single reality is to recognize its relative reality. (p.153)

From the transpersonal psychology perspective the vast majority of people experience a level of consciousness which is in a "defensively contracted state" (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). The purpose or goal of an individual's personal and spiritual growth is seen as an expansion of this contracted form of consciousness. To facilitate this process

the transpersonal psychotherapist borrows methods and techniques freely from other therapeutic approaches, such as Gestalt or Client Centered therapy, but also aims to broaden the client's awareness to include the transpersonal dimensions of being. Facilitating the client's expanded sense of identity to include an awareness of the transpersonal is the hallmark of transpersonal psychotherapy.

From the transpersonal perspective all of us are capable of experiencing expanded, transpersonal states of consciousness. To facilitate the emergence of these states the transpersonal therapist may, for example, work with dance, guided imagery, breathwork, artwork, meditation, or in some cases, psychedelic drugs. By employing these unorthodox therapeutic practices the transpersonal therapist facilitates a release of the restrained "ego" consciousness into the expansiveness of the transpersonal domain. The assumption is that the knowledge gained from these experiences leads to the client's personal realignment towards healthier and more effective values and goals (Wilber, 1996).

Stanislav Grof (1988,1990) has utilized both psychedelic substances and breathwork to initiate transpersonal experiences. He has also written extensively on the crisis of spiritual transformation, which he describes as a "spiritual emergency." These emergencies can bring on serious psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression. Intense and rapid transformational processes can even resemble psychotic breakdowns and may have a similar clinical course. The ability to distinguish between a psychotic breakdown and the more benign and productive spiritual emergency requires the knowledge of someone who is trained in both traditional and transpersonal psychology.

In my opinion, the therapist who works in such a manner as to induce altered states of consciousness takes on a great, and grave, responsibility. I find Grof's use of psychedelics to induce altered states especially disconcerting considering the little we really understand about these experiences. Perhaps the acceleration of what appears to be a natural transformational process is unnecessary and quite destructive for some individuals. Proceeding on the assumption that accelerating the process is in the best interest of the client is a serious question of professional ethics and morality.

In summary, evidence from both the participants' descriptions of the reflective level of spiritual experience and the literature from transpersonal psychology, suggests that, in most cases, these experiences lead to personal growth and integration. However, the spiritual "journey" that ensues with the onset of expanded states of awareness appears to walk a fine line between spiritual transformation and psychological breakdown. In my opinion, members of the helping profession in general, need to have a more complete understanding of the nature of these experiences so that they are able to intervene in an appropriate manner when necessary. In addition, those individuals who are involved in the induction of altered states should be fully aware of the potential repercussions of the work and be fully prepared to take responsibility for whatever the outcome may be.

Conceptual Implications for a Model of Consciousness

In this section I would like to address the question; What does the phenomenological analysis of spiritual experience reveal to us about the nature of human

consciousness? After examining what the results themselves reveal about consciousness, I compare this to Wilber's (1980,1996) model of an evolving, spectrum of consciousness.

In examining the quality of the experiences described by the participants it appears that during the experience the individual does indeed seem to enter an altered state of consciousness of some kind. I use the term "state of consciousness" to refer to a discrete configuration of the various subsystems or elements of awareness* . According to Charles Tart (1975), the elements that make up a state of consciousness include emotion, memory, sense of time, perception and motor activity. The degree to which the participants' reported state of consciousness differs from an "ordinary state of consciousness", appears to vary from one experience to the other. The experiences were clearly on a continuum where each identified state of awareness could be experienced at various levels of intensity or depth.

As was stated earlier, some of the descriptions provided by the participants depicted discrete, narrowly defined states of awareness, while other descriptions revealed a state of consciousness which included a number of the identified states being experienced simultaneously. For example, one of the participants described perceiving the vividness and beauty of the grass and appreciating her natural surroundings more intensely than usual. This experience, which I labeled Beauty/Awe, was experienced without reference to any of the other states, such as Harmony or Connectedness, etc.. In contrast, participant three described a dramatic experience at a religious summer camp that included

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* Stanley Kripner (1972) has listed twenty definable states of consciousness: the dreaming state, the sleeping state, the hypnogogic state, the hypnopompic state, the lethargic state, states of rapture, states of hysteria, states of fragmentation, regressive states, meditative states, trance states, reverie, the daydreaming state, internal scanning, stupor, coma, stored memory, expanded consciousness states, and the normal everyday waking states.

four of the six states of awareness. He reported that he perceived a beautiful white light, felt the presence of God, was overwhelmed with a feeling of being loved, and had a profound intuition that "everything was okay." The following states of awareness; Light, Presence of Other, Love and Harmony, seem to be *simultaneously* experienced in this example.

So, as we can see above, a number of the states can be experienced simultaneously. In addition, it appears that the more intense, or profoundly altered, the state of consciousness experienced by the participants the more we find simultaneously experienced states. In other words, the more intense, dramatically altered states of consciousness seem to include a higher number of the identified states. This conclusion is supported by participant five who, upon reading the descriptions of the ten identified states of awareness during the validity check, stated that in the past she had one profoundly intense experience that included all ten states of awareness. This participant stated that she had forgot to report this experience during the initial interview and was reminded of it later when she read the descriptions of the ten states of awareness.

The above characterization, which suggests that the deeper the altered state of consciousness the more inclusive of the identified states, sounds strikingly similar to Wilber's (1996) use of the term "holarchy" to describe the overall spectrum of consciousness. Just as the various major levels of consciousness identified by Wilber; Persona, Ego, Total Organism, Unity Consciousness, all *transcend* and *include* the previous level, so do the deeper, more profoundly altered spiritual experiences seem to be more inclusive of the less intense spiritual experiences.

Let me try and clarify the above argument. Wilber's model of consciousness suggests that the final or ultimate level of consciousness, Unity Consciousness, transcends and includes all of the previous levels. This transcendence and inclusion also seems to be the case for the various spiritual experiences that the participants reported. The more intense, dramatic experiences include the qualities that are described in the less intense experiences. The deeper, more dramatic reported experiences appear to be more inclusive of the various identified states. In addition, the experiences that include many of the various identified states are more similar in quality to the state of no-boundary or unity consciousness depicted by Wilber and others.

In his model of consciousness Wilber uses the term "transpersonal bands" to describe the "degrees" of consciousness between the level of Total Organism and Unity Consciousness (see figure 1, p.30). It is within these transpersonal bands that the individual supposedly encounters spiritual, or transpersonal, experiences. From the results of the present study, it appears that as consciousness deepens from the level of the Total Organism to the ultimate level of Unity Consciousness, transpersonal experiences become greater and greater *approximations* of Unity Consciousness. In other words, the deeper levels of consciousness include more and more of the identified states of awareness until all of the states are experienced together as Unity Consciousness.

Let me provide an example from the participants' descriptions. Participant four described an intense, and dramatic encounter with an angel. This experience included four of the identified states of awareness. The intense Vision/Trance state included a description of Love, Harmony and Presence of Other. These states can be experienced in

isolation but in the more intense, deeper states of consciousness they appear to be experienced simultaneously with other states.

Therefore, in summary, the phenomenological evidence provided in this study supports Wilber's contention that there are various levels of human consciousness which are essentially "subsets" of the ultimate state of unity consciousness. In chapter five I provided an interpretation of this state of unity consciousness by synthesizing, or making a composite of, the various states of awareness, into one state. This interpretation of unity consciousness is hypothetical due to the fact that none of the participants actually provided a phenomenological description of this state in full. However, as mentioned earlier, some support for the validity of this hypothetical state was provided by one of the participants who upon reading the description of the ten states remembered experiencing a state of consciousness that included all of the identified states. In summary, then, it appears that unity consciousness *transcends* and *includes* all of the participants' reported states as well as the major levels of consciousness identified by Wilber.

Summary Statements and Further Research

To summarize the study I would like to provide the following list of statements. It is important to note that these statements relate specifically to the spontaneously occurring, unusual states of awareness that the participants referred to as spiritual experiences. As such, the comments are not intended as "blanket statements" that can be generalized to other experiences that may be considered spiritual, transpersonal or mystical. The statements are as follows;

1) A total of ten relatively distinct "states of awareness" were reported by the participants as examples of spiritual experience.

2) The quality of the reported experiences provides a picture of an "alternate reality", a reality that is generally depicted as being harmonious, connected and infused with a loving energy.

3) The impact of the reported experiences was consistently reported as a shift in identity and awareness such that the participants concerns moved beyond the boundary of a "small self" to include a more universal or shared identity.

4) In some cases, these experiences are associated with highly distressful psychological and physiological symptoms. This associated distress may be related to adjusting to a higher state of consciousness and an increased level of energy in the body.

5) More intense, dramatic spiritual experiences include the qualities that are described in the less intense experiences and, as such, support a holarchical conceptual representation of consciousness.

6) The reported spiritual experiences appear to represent various levels of consciousness which may be "subsets" of an ultimate state of unity consciousness, as proposed by Wilber (1980, 1996).

One of the most interesting findings of the present study is that people are apparently having profound and spontaneously occurring experiences of altered consciousness that appear to have a dramatic impact on their worldview and their psychological state of mind. The participant's reports suggest that an individual's well-

being can be influenced both positively and negatively by encounters with these spiritual, non-ordinary states of awareness. As I discussed in the section on Transpersonal Psychology, there seems to be great potential for healing associated with these experiences. The implications for the field of psychology in general are that we need to acknowledge the importance of spiritual experience and fully include the spiritual dimension in our models of therapy.

In terms of further research, I would like to suggest the following directions. In line with a phenomenological research path, it would be interesting to see a similar study to the present one carried out with a more heterogeneous population. If the researcher could include participants from varied religious and cultural backgrounds then we would be able to determine whether the ten identified states of awareness are truly representative as a common denominator to the immediate or pre-reflective level of spiritual experience. I would predict that although the language used in the descriptions of spiritual experience would be quite different, the actual pre-reflective level of the experience would be strikingly similar across these religious and cultural boundaries.

Further research is also clearly indicated on the subject of the application of induced altered states as a method of psychological treatment. It appears that the potential for healing is great, but the possibility of harm is clearly a significant risk. There is a need for well designed follow-up studies that track both how individuals benefit, and also suffer, after they have encountered these nonordinary states of consciousness. I would be interested in research that asked questions such as the following: Do encounters with spiritual experiences appear to lead to an acceleration of the personal growth process, or

as Wilber (1996) might phrase it, an advancement in the evolution of consciousness? If so, is an induced advancement of consciousness and an acceleration of personal growth a benign process?

I would like to end with some of my own personal reactions to the reported experience provided by the participants. The participants' reports of spiritual experience struck me in terms of how these experiences could convey so much profound information in such a brief period of time. Not only were the participants "flooded" with a dramatically altered view of the world but this new worldview remained with them and informed their values and beliefs as well as influencing their actions. In reference to the postmodern discussion addressed earlier, these dramatic shifts in the individual's worldview seem to contradict the radical social constructionist's proposition that all meaning is socially produced. In the numerous examples of spiritual experience provided, a wealth of knowledge and meaning is "conveyed" to the experiencer in these brief, unusual states of consciousness. Although the interpretation of one's spiritual experience may be influenced by the language and conceptual framework of the surrounding culture, there certainly appears to be a *common ground* from which the experience emerges.

Charlene Spretnak argues in her book "States of Grace" (1991) that this common ground is the source of all the major religious traditions, or what is referred to as the wisdom traditions. Spretnak's views are in agreement with those of William James (1902), who proposed that immediate personal experience provides the knowledge or awareness upon which all the organized religions are based. In warning against the dangers of a radical social constructionist viewpoint, Spretnak challenges the proposition that claims to

knowledge are entirely relative and "one discourse is as good as the next." Instead she suggests that the world's wisdom traditions, for example Buddhism, Native spirituality, Goddess spirituality, and the core teachings of the Semitic religions, illuminate the basic processes, or patterns of the universe. These basic processes are seen as the common ground from which the teachings of the wisdom traditions have emerged.

I would suggest that the interpretations of the ten states of awareness provided in this study are representations of this common ground. These brief glimpses of an alternate reality reflect the shared nature of both our "being" and our interconnected relationship with the world. Whether we refer to it as an altered state of consciousness or spiritual perception, I believe the view of the world encountered through spiritual experience is of profound practical importance to each and every one of us. Just beyond the confusion, suffering and apparent contradictions of humankind's current waking state of consciousness, is an apparently higher, more complete state of consciousness where qualities such as love, interconnectedness, and harmony are readily perceived. I believe we, as a species, are in a process whereby we will eventually witness the emergence and realization of this higher state of consciousness. I would like to give the last word to Albert Einstein, who gives us one more example of spiritual perception (Einstein, 1995).

> There are moments when one feels free from one's identification with human limitations and inadequacies. At such moments one imagines that one stands on some spot on a small planet, gazing in amazement at the cold yet profoundly moving beauty of the eternal, the unfathomable: life and death flow into one, and there is neither evolution nor destiny; only Being. (p.106)

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Section 1- Biographical Information

1) Could you tell me a little bit about your life beginning with where you were born, your family life and any other significant information about your personal history?

2) Is there anything else about your life which, if I knew, would help me to understand your spiritual experiences?

Section 2 - Spiritual Experiences

3) Could you describe to me in detail your spiritual experiences with an emphasis on the actual feelings, thoughts and sensations that you experienced at that particular time?

Section 3 - The Impact

4) Could you describe to me what impact these experiences have had on your life?

Appendix B

Interview Introduction

My purpose for conducting this interview is to gain an in-depth understanding of your spiritual experiences. I invite you to share with me, at whatever level you feel comfortable, the particular experiences that you describe as spiritual. I am particularly interested in your spiritual experiences described in your own words and, therefore, would encourage you to avoid abstraction or analysis of your experience.

A secondary interest, which will be addressed near the end of the interview, is how these experiences have impacted your life.

I would like to begin the interview with some biographical questions that provide a picture of who you are within your personal history. Please provide only as much information as you are comfortable with.

Appendix C

Consent Form

The purpose of the present study is to gain an in-depth understanding of people's spiritual experiences. The results of the study will be of benefit to readers by providing a thorough qualitative understanding of these experiences. A deeper understanding of spiritual experience will be helpful both to those who may encounter spiritual experience in their lives and to those professionals who work with people.

As a participant you will be invited to take part in an interview that will last approximately two to three hours. This interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to a printed format. The interview will begin with some questions about your personal history and then move on to gathering specific information about your spiritual experience(s). Please feel free to refrain from answering any question that you are uncomfortable with. Also, you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason that you see fit.

The information gathered in the study will be examined for common themes and to reveal the overall structure of the experience. All of the information provided by you as a participant will be held in the strictest confidence. Your name will not be used in the study and all of the audio tapes will be erased once they have been transcribed to printed format. Only myself, as the primary researcher, will be aware of your identity. The final results of the study, which will not contain any reference to your name, will be considered property of the University of Alberta. The results will be available for your own examination prior to their release to the University of Alberta.

* * * Signing this form indicates that you have read and understood this consent form and agree to be a participant in the study.

_____ _____

researcher's signature participant's signature

date : _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _